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PC GAMER[®]

2020
PREVIEW
THE YEAR'S 41
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REVEALED



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SHOOTER ACTION
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ISSUE 341



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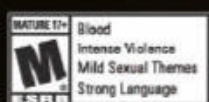
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“THE MOD THAT BECAME A GAME SPAWNS A MOD THAT’S BECOME A GAME”



For a company that’s become such an ever-present staple of PC gaming today, Valve remains oddly mysterious. Rejecting tradition at every turn, it does things its own way (for better or worse), and seldom feels the need to explain itself.

Getting to step inside its doors, then, feels a bit like being invited into Willy

ROBIN VALENTINE

Specialist in
Walrus crimes

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This month
Started working on Valve Time. Expect our next issue in ten years.

Wonka’s Chocolate Factory, and *Dota Underlords* is surely one of its most intriguing confections. The mod that became a game spawns a mod that has become a game. The story of how that happened, and what happens next, reveals much about how both Valve’s changed, and how it’s staying the same.

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The PC Gamer team



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This month
Almost burst a blood vessel playing adrenaline-fuelled sequel *Doom Eternal*.



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This month
Headed to China to discover a game dev scene both thriving and under threat.



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This month
Wrote his first PC Gamer review this month – for posthumous rhythm game *Avicii Inventor*.



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Fantasy colonialism

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This month
Investigated a new MMORPG brought to us by the world’s most successful bookshop.

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DOTA UNDERLORDS

Valve's most excitable team brings us into the office to see the future of their autobattler.

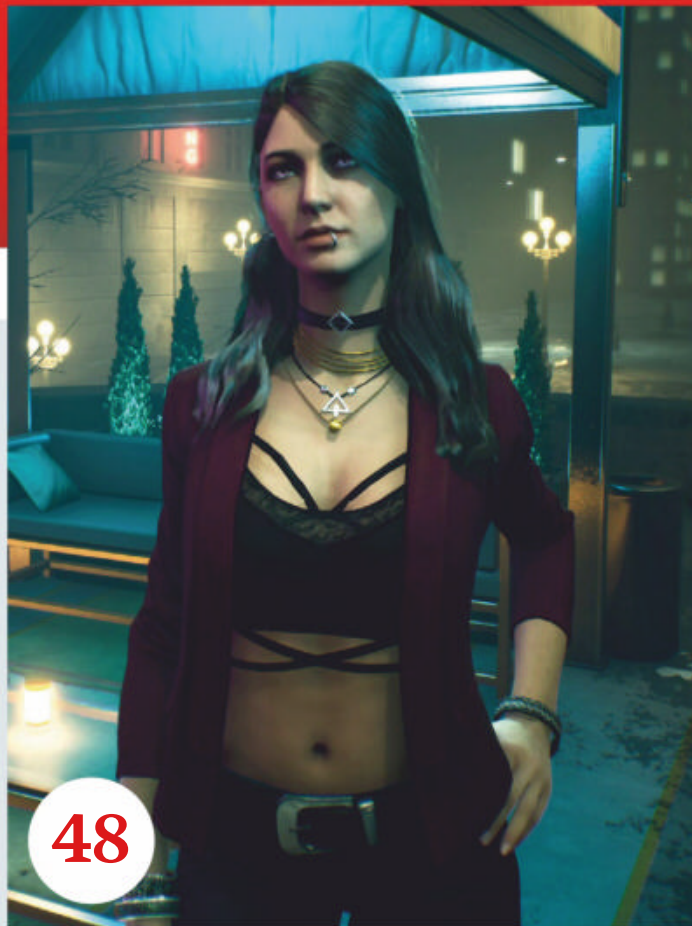
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



The Outer Worlds is already a brisk RPG, but this run took less than 15 minutes.

SPEED FORCE

AWESOME GAMES DONE QUICK 2020 raises over \$3 million, breaking its record

Speedruns weren't the only records being broken at this year's Awesome Games Done Quick, which raised a grand total of \$3,133,898.56. That's more than \$700,000 higher than last year's event and \$100,000 more than the previous Summer Games Done Quick. The money raised from these 54,160 individual donations goes to the Prevent Cancer Foundation.

As always, AGDQ's speedrunners showcased a massive variety of games, from devilishly tricky platformers to entire RPG

anthologies. One of the highlights was Tomatoangus, who had to add a 'g' to his handle before he was allowed to participate, and his *Fallout* Anthology run. When he got to the *Fallout 4* leg of his journey, he brought out props – hastily assembled – to show how he's able to

glitch through walls and shave off vital seconds at the start of the game. It's a great example of why speedrunning has become so compelling – it's a fascinating look into the innards of these games, as well as being a lot of fun to watch.

Plenty of newer games were on display, too. PsychOsis did an *Amid Evil* run where the game's designers chimed in online, and we got to see the first ever run of *The Outer Worlds* at AGDQ by Sharo, along with another first for AGDQ, the much older *Terraria*. That one has some ups and downs to say the least, but it was saved by speedrunner Badger's positivity and sense of humour.

**OVER THE WEEK-LONG
EVENT, AN
IMPRESSIVE 134
GAMES WERE RUN**

MUSIC TO MY EARS

STEAM SOUNDTRACKS



Valve's changed the way its store handles soundtracks, making them their own separate thing instead of DLC for their game of origin, and giving them their own place in libraries. It's a great move that should make it far more convenient to enjoy music from the games you love going forward. ■RV

REVAN ALMIGHTY

REVAN IS CANON AGAIN



When Disney bought Star Wars, a lot of great stories became non-canon – including *Knights of the Old Republic*. But in *Rise of Skywalker*'s Visual Dictionary there are references to Darth Revan, meaning the reformed Sith Lord (or not, depending on how you played) is now officially recognised. ■AK

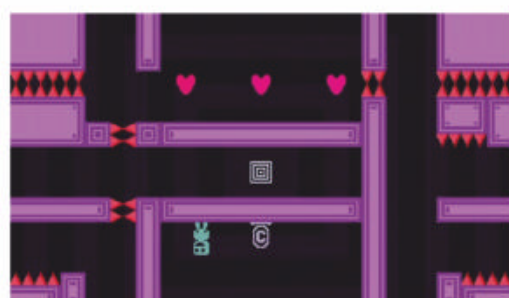
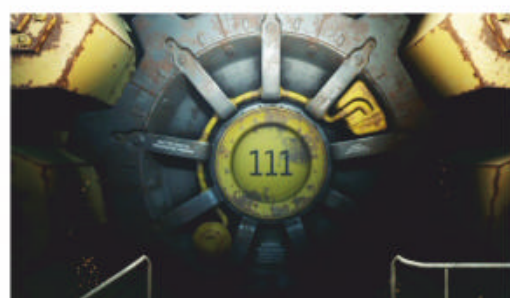


BACK IN THE GAME

INTEL'S NEW PROTOTYPE



Intel plans to re-enter the dedicated graphics card market in 2020. Powered by its new Xe Graphics architecture, Intel showed a 'developer test vehicle' DG1 card running *Warframe* at CES. Performance wasn't great, but this was early hardware and drivers, so there's still hope. ■JW



ABOVE, TOP: A frenetic, retro-style shooter like *Amid Evil* was a good fit for speedrunning.

ABOVE, BOTTOM: Who needs school when AGDQ offers practical lessons about escaping vaults?

Gravity-flipping platformer *VVVVVV* also celebrated its ten-year anniversary at the event, a special occasion that was marked by a surprise announcement. Creator Terry Cavanagh decided to release the game's source code for both the mobile and desktop versions on GitHub, cracking it open for anyone who fancied a peek – though Cavanagh warned that the code was “kinda a mess”.

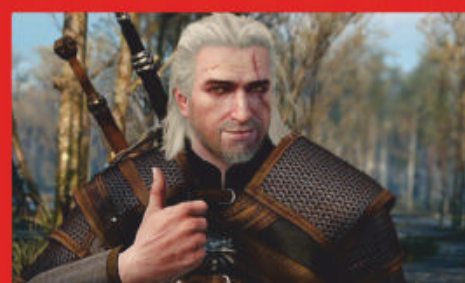
“I was young and more interested in getting something on the screen than implementing it properly,” he said after its Awesome Games Done Quick appearance. “Maybe the best thing about *VVVVVV*'s source code is that it stands as proof of what you can hack together even if you're not much of a programmer.”

BIG NUMBERS

Over the week-long event, an impressive 134 games were run, with something to watch pretty much constantly. More than 2,750 people showed up to cheer on the ambitious speedrunners in Florida, but nearly 100 times more people were watching on Twitch, peaking at 236,000 concurrent viewers. While AGDQ 2020 has concluded and the speedrunners are all taking well-deserved rests, you can still catch up on anything you might have missed at twitch.tv/gamesdonequick.

Fraser Brown, Jody Macgregor

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

The Witcher 3

Thanks to the show, the game now has more people playing than ever before.

Resident Evil 3 Remake

Capcom confirmed an April 3 release date for its latest remake.

Half-Life Alyx

We finally got to hear the creepy G-Man, once again played by Mike Shapiro, for the first time in 12 years.

Escape from Tarkov

Despite apologising for an interview that claimed women can't handle combat, the devs still don't want to add playable female characters.

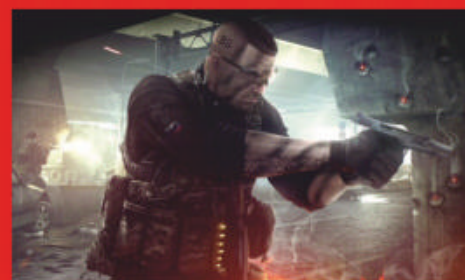
Fantasy Flight Interactive

The digital division of the board game publisher has closed its doors. It only got to release one game.

Windows 7

Support for Windows 7 has finally come to an end after a decade.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?



THE SPY
The Spy is not the star of a PS4 open world game. Yet.

As a dare, The Spy attempted to write this month's column using a console web browser to type directly into a Google Docs page. The sheer act of endurance it required to write longform prose with a controller rendered all of The Spy's finger tendons and arm muscles nonfunctional. Luckily, thanks also to a console, The Spy was able to recuperate by laying on a sofa, watching the entirety of Deep Fried Masters on Amazon Prime Video. As a result, The Spy is beginning to understand why the world is in the sorry state it's in.

Clearly consoles are dangerous then, both physically and culturally. Maybe it would be for the best if all of their games just came to PC. Microsoft has already recognised this fact and in recent years has brought all of its first-party exclusives to PC – everything from *Forza Horizon 4* to, er, *ReCore*. Thanks, I guess.

But will Sony ever make the jump? Microsoft's cross-platform push makes sense because a) they make Windows, and b) it's not like people are kicking down shop doors to buy an Xbox One. Sony, meanwhile, has preferred to keep its games confined to PlayStation – even the PlayStation 3, which once had so little going for it that people had to pretend to

like games like *Warhawk* and *Haze* and David 'God of War' Jaffe's *Calling All Cars*.

According to Kotaku, though, *Horizon: Zero Dawn* – a PS4 open world game that asks players, what if robots were dinosaurs and angry? – is coming to PC later this year. If true, it's a big deal. Sure, other formerly PS4 exclusives like *Heavy Rain* and *Journey* eventually came to PC on the Epic Store, but *Horizon* developer Guerrilla Games is owned by Sony, making the possibility of it crossing borders a much more significant milestone.

If accurate, it could be a testbed for other Sony first-party games, like *God of War* – a PS4 open world game that asks players, what if you could beat the shit out of every Norse god? Or *Spider-Man* – a PS4 open world game that asks players, what if Spider-Man was in a pretty decent PS4 open world game?

ON THE HORIZON

Kotaku's story cites three people familiar with Sony's plans, all speaking anonymously. But it's also perhaps supported by a job listing by Naughty Dog, another of Sony's first-party studios. The advert, which is for a graphics programmer for *The Last of Us Part II*, has requirements like a knowledge of DirectX 12 and Vulkan, as well as knowledge of Nvidia architectures – all PC things. And then, to hammer the point home, it requests "PC programming experience".

Even if a crop of PS4 exclusives are headed to PC, this might not be a full change of policy for Sony. We're in the latter stages of the PS4's life – a great time to expand the market for a publisher's games. When the PS5 arrives, The Spy wouldn't be surprised to see Sony close the gates – assuming they ever open in the first place. As for whether you should be excited to play *Horizon: Zero Dawn* on PC, The Spy will simply say that it's better quality, but less culturally significant, than watching the

episode of Deep Fried Masters where a man named 'Goose' attempts to deep fry frozen gummy worms. The Spy will leave you to draw your own conclusions. Spy out. ■
The Spy

SONY, MEANWHILE, HAS PREFERRED TO KEEP ITS GAMES CONFINED TO PLAYSTATION

This month in... 2010



1 "It's the bomb," states our cover feature of *Fallout: New Vegas*, which is clever because colloquially it means it's good, but also nuclear bombs are a key part of the *Fallout* setting. It's a strong cover to kick off the decade: signalling the continued return of ambitious, intricate, incredibly janky RPGs on PC.

ISSUE
211, March 2010
ON THE COVER
Fallout: New Vegas
IN THE CINEMAS
Shutter Island

2 Reviews include *Napoleon: Total War* and *VVVVVV*. Inevitably some claimed that PC gaming was dying at this moment in history, but they were idiots.



3 The best thing this issue was Tom Francis's six page feature about *Spelunky* – specifically the free version, released before it became an indie mega-hit. Filled with Tom's funny anecdotes, and developer Derek Yu's insightful commentary, this is a perfect love letter to one of the best games on PC.



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PCG INVESTIGATES



Yes, Your Grace's real royal family.

PREGAMING

YES, YOUR GRACE's wild pre-release Discord roleplay server

It's an auspicious day in Atana. Members of the gentry have gathered in their finest with the kingdom of Davern to witness the wedding between their two princes. As the officiant, Queen Soproxi of Atana bursts dramatically into the room only fashionably late to the festivities. "GOOD MORNING RICH MEMBERS OF ATANA!" She yells. "AND BEAUTIFUL WAR-TORN DAVES!"

The queen's bold entrance is met with dozens of reactions from the crowd in the form of Discord emoticons beneath her all-caps messages. There are nearly 50 of us sitting silently in a voice chat room called 'the-wedding' listening to a bot called 'Rythm' provide the sounds of a lute-playing bard. An unknown number more are spectating the ceremony unfold in several text channels. These are my first confusing but intriguing moments in the official Discord server for Brave At Night's upcoming kingdom management game *Yes, Your Grace*.

DUNGEONS & DISCORDS

The important roles of the kings, queens and princes are all played by community-elected members. Mike Rose, company director of *Yes, Your Grace's* publisher No More Robots, says the first few weeks were spent letting members get to know one another and choosing a

kingdom to join. After that, Rose says he encouraged folks to start choosing 'parts' to play. "I didn't realise at the time what I was doing," Rose says.

"I essentially turned the Discord server into a D&D session. Just a really, really long one."

As part of the roleplay, server members of the three kingdoms vote on how to address scenarios Rose throws at them, similarly to how the full game will challenge players to make decisions about the Davern kingdom's future. Sometimes they have fanart contests. Other times they propose festivals. Occasionally Rose gathers them all for live events like the royal wedding.

Back at the wedding, Queen Soproxi continues the ceremony with "Yeah, yeah, beloved, love each other passionately and solemnly, blah blah blah," much to the delight of her audience. She skips over the vows, telling the two princes they can deliver them as toasts instead.

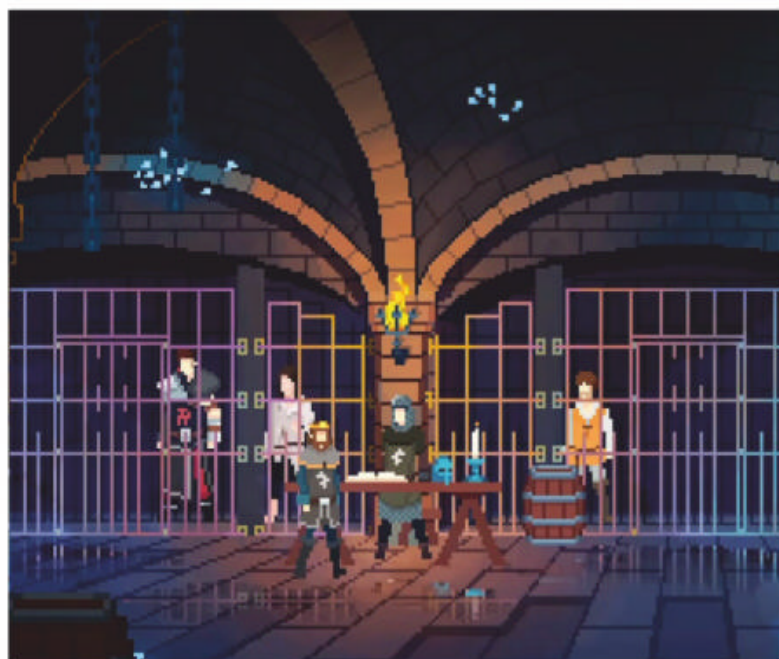
I asked Rose how much coaching he gives the cast prior to such an important event as a live wedding roleplay. Despite appearing flippant, I imagine that Queen Soproxi put some forethought into her performance as the wedding's officiant.

Both princes clearly prepared their vows in advance. King Bork of Atana's wedding toast, full of words struck through as if he'd repurposed a speech from another court event, was also clearly a planned joke.



Repurposed

Discord certainly wasn't built with Rose's complicated, ever-changing roleplay servers in mind. He says he's pulled together multiple chat bots made by various people to achieve what he needs. He says Discord itself "is regularly in my direct messages asking 'what on Earth are you up to this time?'".



FAR LEFT: Imagine the entire dungeon filled with rowdy Radovians and their pet rainbow rats.

LEFT: This in-game trial probably has fewer conspiracy theorists than King Bork's poisoning.

INVESTIGATION CHECK *Players speculated on who would be motivated to poison King Bork*



QUEEN SOPROXI

The queen's first remark was "excuse me?" when it turned out Prince Bun would become king.



PRINCE BUN

Could the prince have poisoned his brother? Bun is a kind soul, but maybe there's a darker plot hidden within.



SIR KENT

Kent Grimmer delivered the wine cups. He says he was only the messenger but he has been clashing with King Bork.



KING BORK

It turns out the Radovians had meant to poison King Davit. Perhaps Bork helped them, only to become an accidental victim.

King Bork declares, "To the greatest nation of all!" Specifying, in all caps that he means Atana of course. The royals drink from their given goblets. The tension in the dungeon is palpable.

"ALSO PEOPLE, I AM NOW DEAD!" Bork yells. The Radovian channel lights up with obscenities, all caps, and surprise. "THE WRONG PERSON," says one Radovian. No matter, the escape plan can't be wasted. The Davern and Atenan royals panic. Soproxi yells for someone to catch Lord Kent. Prince Bun screams for a physician as his brother the king goes into shock. The Radovians burst out of the dungeon.

Chieftain Soulcrusher of Radovia, now free, declares in the-ceremony chat, "Our time is at hand! Brothers and sisters take our freedom! LONG LIVE RADOVIA!" On his cue, we fill 'the-audience' chat with rainbow-coloured rat emoticons in honour of the rats we befriended in the dungeons. Chaos reigns for several minutes. Bun is granted the Discord server role 'on the throne', and his now gold-coloured display name is changed to 'Bun the unwilling TEMPORARY king'.

Sir Mike Rose, in character but ever the dungeon

master, declares that trials will be held next week to determine who poisoned King Bork. Everyone will vote on who to question about the events of the wedding. The dust settles for the day but even I, previously uninvolved in the

proceedings, feel excess adrenaline still pumping through my veins from hopping excitedly between chat rooms to keep up with the drama.

The *Yes, Your Grace* server is full of fun and games but at the end of the day, No more Robots is a publisher. Rose believes that the emotional investment created in the game's server will translate to sales. For server members, *Yes, Your Grace's* Discord is a hobby. Rose suspects, as do I, that other publishers may soon catch on to his particular strategy of 'lots of shouting and free clever things' to market small games. ■

Lauren Morton

For the wedding, Rose says he gave the key players an outline of events – minus the plot twists he had planned – about a day in advance.

"I said to Soproxi, 'Just do the wedding,'" he explains with a laugh. "Do it however you want. You can look up wedding ceremonies online if you want." For Soproxi, it turned into a silly rushed ceremony where her character could make digs at the Daves in attendance.

"You'd think that would be a terrible idea," Rose

admits. "But the thing is [they] feel so connected to the story. They feel like if they don't do a good job of it they're going to let everyone down and it's going to come across as silly or boring. So they put so much effort into it." After

months of playing these parts, even members with smaller roles such as cooks and knights are invested in building the most fun experience they can.

THE RED-OVIAN WEDDING

Down in the dungeon, us Radovians are plotting an escape. Chieftain Soulcrusher is keeping mum about the details but I gather that we've orchestrated a Game of Thrones-like poisoning at the wedding feast. The 'radovian-escape-plan' text channel, seen only by us, is nearly vibrating with excitement as Lord Kent Grimmer of Atana serves drinks to the royals.

EVERYONE WILL VOTE ON WHO TO QUESTION ABOUT THE EVENTS OF THE WEDDING

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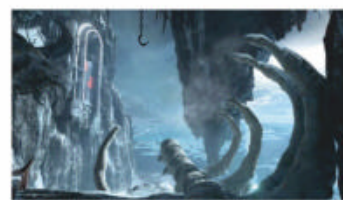
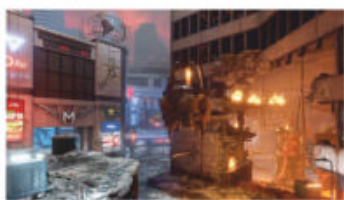
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PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
March 20, 2020

DEVELOPER
id Software

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
doometernal.com

DOOM ETERNAL

An explosion of ultraviolence even more intense than last time

Playing this FPS sequel is... exhausting. After three hours, I feel like my nervous system needs a vacation. Any good shooter demands something from your reflexes, learning how to aim while dodging incoming fire, but that's just learning how to breathe in *Doom Eternal*. Properly operating your entire body – and staying alive – is a lot harder.

The game on 'ultraviolence', its version of 'hard' difficulty, is the most stressed I've been playing a game in a long time, because almost every fight has me feeling like I'm on the ragged edge. It's been a couple years since I played any of id Software's 2016 *Doom*, the surprisingly great reboot that *Eternal* is following up on, but I don't remember it feeling like this. *Doom* was fast, rabid, and satisfying in its brutality and the ways it encouraged aggression to stay alive. You had to perform melee 'glory kills' to wrench life-refilling power-ups from enemies, and you'd pull out the chainsaw at key moments to turn an enemy into a geyser of blood and ammo refills. *Eternal* starts at a level of intensity *Doom* may only have reached towards the end.

The sequel gives you those basic tools in the first five minutes, and then keeps layering on more for the first three hours. It's overwhelming, but *Eternal*'s goal here is to essentially give you access to superpowers and then force you to learn how to use them instinctively, or you die.

At least on hard, all the enemies except the shambling fodder move fast, are aggressive, and can tear you to pieces in seconds, which means constantly closing range to get melee glory kills that restore your health becomes second nature. But that's hardly enough to keep you alive for long. The biggest source of tension, for me, is remembering to use each of the

new cooldown abilities *Eternal* introduces while also monitoring my weapons, swapping between them as needed.

There's now a grenade you can use to soften up a group of enemies, and later you can swap it out for a cryo grenade that freezes them. Heavier demons have weak spots that the grenade can help you destroy, robbing them of major damage potential or even opening them up for a glory kill. If you don't remember to use the grenade when it's off cooldown, you're probably dead, because *Doom Eternal* throws a lot of enemies at you at once.

There's a dash move now that you can use twice in a row. If you don't use it constantly you're probably dead, because *Doom Eternal*'s enemies are aggressive, and they're fast. More than once I embarrass myself by missing shotgun blasts at imps as they leap circles around me faster than I can track them.

There's the flame belch, which sets enemies on fire, and while they're on fire you can shoot them to get armour pickups, in the same way glory kills give you health. If you don't remember to use the flame belch constantly, you're definitely dead. That armour is essential.

Then there's your weapons, staples like the shotgun, heavy cannon, and plasma rifle, which each have weapon mods that can save your ass in the right situation. One time I vented the built-up heat from my plasma rifle to blast out a shockwave that saved me from a Hell Knight who was getting ready to knock my head off. I was constantly switching between guns to use whatever was best in the moment, or because I'd just run out of ammo for one and was scrambling to stay alive.

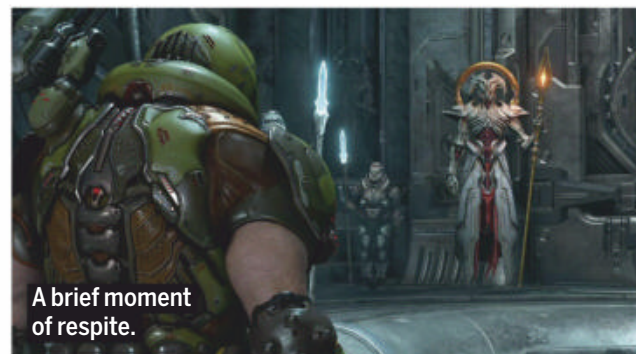
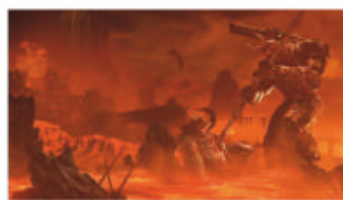
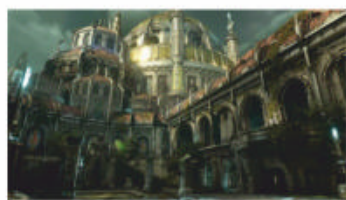
ARMED TO THE TEETH

Within the first three hours I had all of the above, plus the rocket launcher, and I'd been introduced to a handful of other powerup systems. There are relics which give you special abilities, like the 'blood punch', which you charge up by performing glory kills. It gives your punch

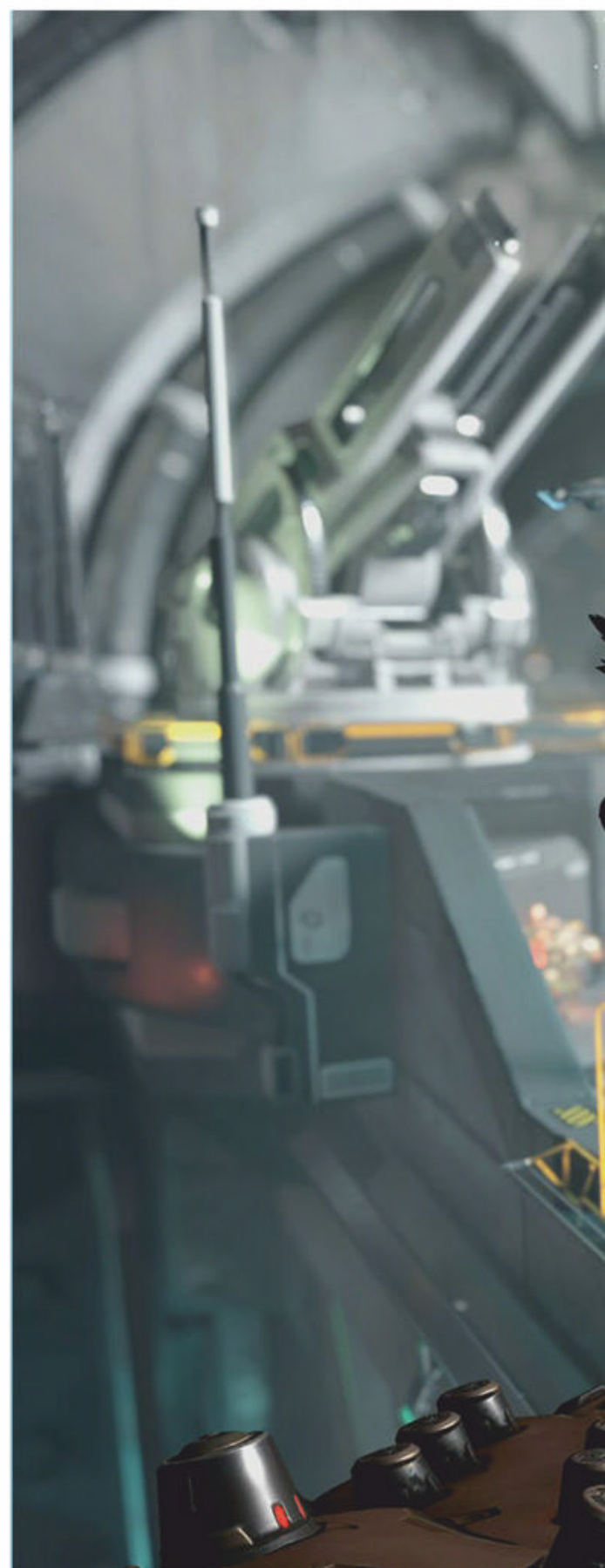


WHILE THEY'RE ON FIRE, YOU CAN SHOOT THEM TO GET ARMOUR PICKUPS

Doom Eternal



A brief moment of respite.



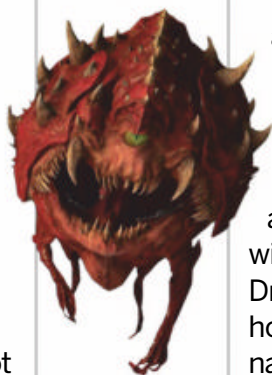
➤ an extra area of effect and deals a lot more damage, so you can One Punch Man your way through a crowd. There's an upgrade system for those relics. There are also suit upgrade points, which can be spent on enhancements like vacuuming power-ups in from further away or lowering cooldowns. And you can upgrade weapon mods, leading to a fully decked-out gun that can then get some kind of final special power boost.

Eternal doesn't hesitate to throw all these systems at you in the first three hours, like a sadistic juggling instructor lobbing live chainsaws at you. It's bold, not the way most big budget videogames would do it, and I admire the chutzpah even if a smoother ramp up would've been more pleasant. You can feel how eager id's designers were to give you everything, rather than slowly re-tell the origin story of becoming Doom Guy.

The few times I came out of fights in *Doom Eternal* without coming close to dying, I felt really smart. It meant I'd done a good job of dodging and aiming, landing headshots and aggressively using glory kills to keep my health up, but more importantly it meant I'd actually managed to execute something approximating a plan. Like, OK, I'm going to shoot a grenade into the Cacodemon's mouth first, which will let me kill him with a melee finisher, then I'll flamethrower a crowd and pick up as much armour as I can, then switch to the shotgun and keep running forward without stopping to put some distance between me and the mob.

This all happens super fast. It's a mix of instincts and in-the-moment planning, which is what makes *Doom Eternal* so exhausting – your situational awareness has to be running in overdrive at all times. It's really fun, but absolutely not relaxing.

I'm sure on lower difficulty settings *Doom Eternal* feels a little bit less frantic, but creative director Hugo Martin told me they want people to have the same experience no matter the difficulty setting. *Doom Eternal* is designed to make you constantly switch weapons and use everything in your arsenal to make it through. The more aggressive enemies push you to use the flame belch to build armour; the weak points on heavy-hitters



like the Mancubus and Revenant force you to use grenades or specific weapon mods to cripple them. Sticking to the super shotgun isn't going to cut it this time.

Purely for its combat, *Doom* feels like it already has a good shot at being the best shooter of 2020. I also saw some really, really cool art design in the first couple hours, with enormous demonic doors and the giant bodies of preserved ancient warriors. This is a *Doom* game with lore, and it's cool, in a cheesy Dragonforce lyrics kinda way. In a couple hours I met a ghost king, a brooding guy named The Betrayer whose face had definitely seen better days, and used some kind of talisman to unshield the soul of a Hell wizard before pulling his head off with my bare hands. *Eternal* is definitely going bigger with the *Doom* universe, but still keeps it out of the way of the action.

There is downtime between the insanity, too, with some platforming segments and some short quiet moments to soak in the luxurious art.

I was so focused on living through every fight and trying to remember every weapon at my disposal that I didn't even realise, until later, that the essence of '90s *Doom* was largely absent. Over time *Doom's* legacy has been distilled down into speed, violence, demons, and shooting. But so much of *Doom* was actually moody exploration of intricate levels; the spaces you explored made it *Doom* as much as the guns did.

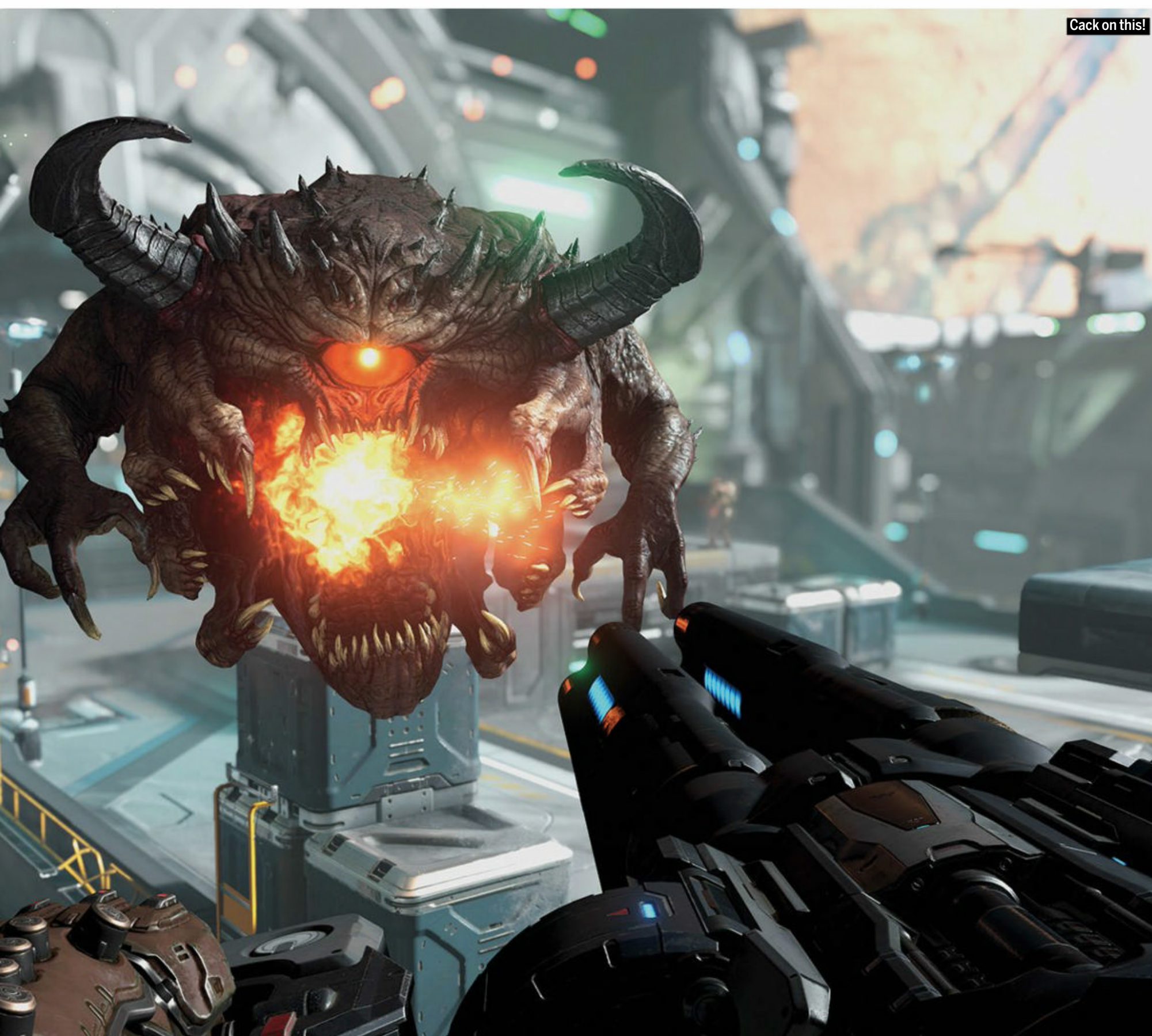
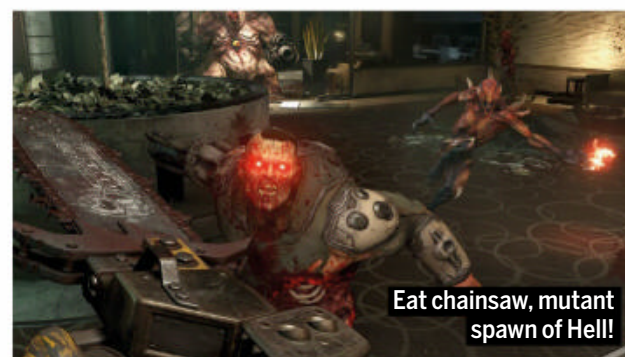
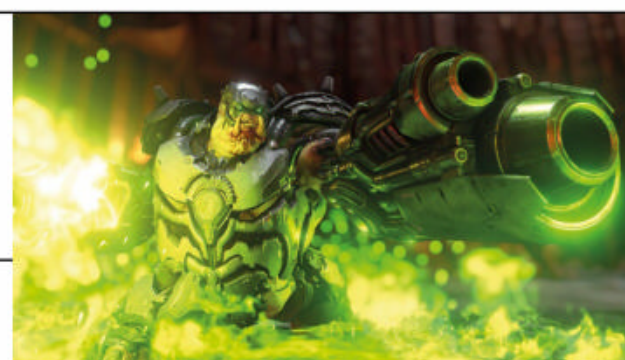
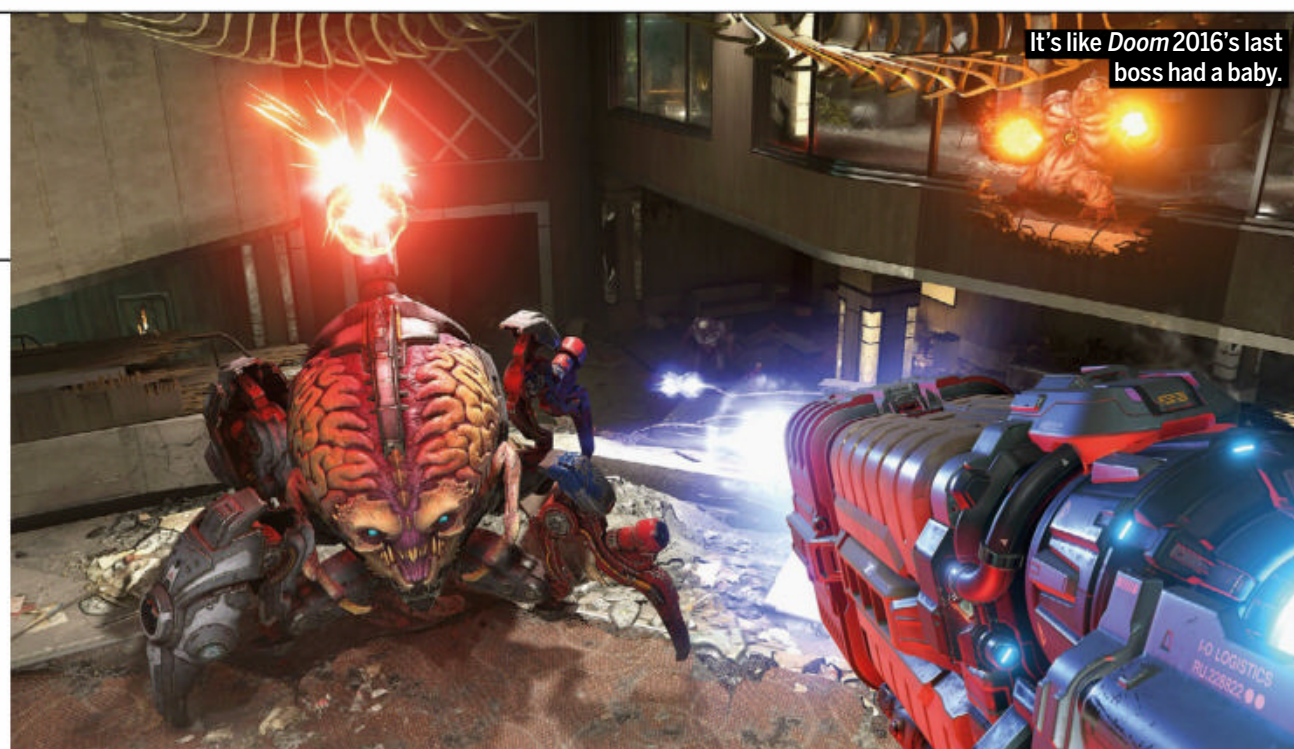
TOP SECRETS

That level design isn't really on display in the opening hours of *Doom Eternal*. There are absolutely secrets to be found and side paths to go down, but *Eternal* is more focused on funnelling you from one intense fight to the next than to more intricate exploration. Towards the end of levels it does give you the ability to fast travel back to earlier rooms, and there are side challenges you'll want to revisit to earn more upgrade points and so on. Hopefully the game settles into a less manic pace as it goes, and makes the act of progressing through complex spaces as integral and rewarding as the combat.

Doom 2016 pulled off that balance beautifully, and *Eternal* is such a more is more sequel it may end up being lopsided in its focus on the shooting. But if the whole game keeps me on my toes as much as the first three hours, I don't know if I'll mind. As long as my heart can take the sustained stress, anyway.

Wes Fenlon

STICKING TO THE SUPER SHOTGUN ISN'T GOING TO CUT IT THIS TIME



PREVIEW

Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous



That's going to take some tidying up.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Owlcat Games

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

LINK
wrath.owlcatgames.com

PATHFINDER: WRATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS

The CRPG is back with a darker tone and exciting new classes

It's Tuesday, and demons are invading again. It's the sort of cataclysm you'd expect from a place called 'the Worldwound'. A planar tear to the Abyss has opened up, and now mere mortals must push back against a tide of demonic rage flowing into the dark world of Golarion.

Pathfinder: Kingmaker was part of a welcome clutch of new CRPGs to follow *Path of Exile's* success. Its follow-up, *Wrath of the Righteous*, is set in a different part of the world, with new heroes and villains, and Owlcat Games promises "a more epic conflict". There won't be a straightforward divide between righteous mortals and furious demons, however. Traitorous mortals are all too happy to sacrifice a few friends for a taste of demonic power, and there are demons among the hordes who are fed up of endless war.

The new Mythic class system lets you occupy this grey area by adopting infernal or divine qualities on top of your original class. You can be a powerful angelic wizard or a demonic oracle, for example. Your shift in either direction is accompanied by appearance changes that will change how you're treated by NPCs. Go full demon and you can have a honking great pair of horns, though not everyone you meet will be into it.

I actually prefer the sound of the other Mythic classes. You can be one of the

most powerful spellcasters in the world if you decide to be a Liche – though you have to be slightly undead to access those powers. The Liche is unlikely to mix well with another Mythic class that Owlcat describes as a kind of fantasy Judge Dredd. They must squash corruption wherever they find it. They can look into a soul and know if it's guilty or not – though they don't always know what a person is guilty of exactly. Finally, my favourite: the Trickster. Tricksters are masterful game players. So masterful, in fact, that they can break the fourth wall and affect dice rolls in your game. Rolled a result of one for a critical miss? Have the Trickster sneakily flip that to a 20 for you. Shhh, don't tell the developers.

CRUSADER KINGS

Kingdom management was a big part of the first game's appeal. The system has been overhauled for the new setting. As the head of a crusade, you are now raising huge armies and deploying them to squish demon incursions. That might not sound as deep as a system that lets you run an entire kingdom, but there is plenty to do.

You have to appoint characters to key positions – make sure you have a trustworthy general, and a barely trustworthy chief spy.

You also need to raise armies, secure troops and move those armies to key strategic positions on the world map. If you have a spare force, you can even send armies to distant corners of the world to explore and discover secrets.

I played a section of a fortress assault mission, which involved killing a lot of giant spiders. The darker tone is immediately obvious. I bloodily dispatched giants and archers on the ramparts, unlocking doors that led deeper and deeper into the castle. This combat-heavy section can't show off the game's most promising features however. The new Mythic class paths look great, and Owlcat is determined to do a better job of polishing the sequel to make sure consequences correctly line up with your decisions during the final stages of the game. Time-limited decisions are gone too – apparently players absolutely hated them. Now you will be able to really ponder those difficult moral decisions. Angel or demon? The choice is yours.

Tom Senior



GO FULL DEMON AND YOU CAN HAVE A HONKING GREAT PAIR OF HORNS

Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous



PREVIEW

The Elder Scrolls Online: Greymoor

Greymoor is meant to be more grim and gothic than the usual *Elder Scrolls* adventure.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 18

DEVELOPER
Zenimax Online Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
elderscrollsonline.com

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE: GREYMOOR

The MMO's next chapter won't be shackled to *Skyrim* nostalgia

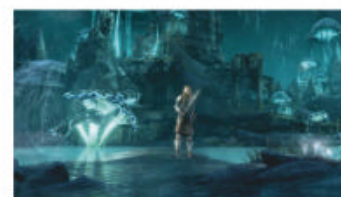
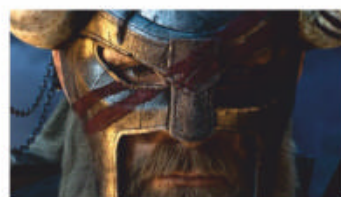
Skyrim is inarguably a monolith in gaming. Now, *The Elder Scrolls Online*, the MMO set in Tamriel 1,000 years before *TESV*, is headed back to the Nord homeland for a major story update.

NEW
INFO

The Elder Scrolls Online has been to places covered by past mainline *TES* games before. It has hosted a chapter in *Morrowind*. Its original campaign included the eastern half of *Skyrim*. It has gone to Cyrodiil. But returning to *Skyrim* seems like a distinct peak to summit.

It's easy to imagine that *ESO*: *Greymoor* could amount to just another version of *The Elder Scrolls V*, but *ESO*'s creative director Rich Lambert is adamant that the MMO will chart its own course through *Skyrim* and beyond.

"What we tried to do with [*Greymoor*] was tell our own stories and not



necessarily set up prequels or existing characters," Lambert says. Instead of wallowing in pure nostalgia, giving an origin to every detail of the dragonborn's adventure, *The Elder Scrolls Online: Greymoor* seems hyper focused on a few *Skyrim* details and adding a few of its own.

"We didn't want to retell the *Skyrim* story," Lambert says in our interview "We wanted to forge our own path." Lambert expresses this sentiment several times throughout the day with a cadence that suggests it's been repeated frequently throughout *ESO*'s development.

WANTING MOOR

The two biggest themes we've seen in the *Greymoor* chapter reveal are vampires and the giant underground expanse that is

Blackreach. As Lambert says though, *ESO* is telling its own story about both. He refers to the new setting as "gothic" and dark, both of which come across in the trailer revealed last week. Telling their own stories can be a challenge. Zenimax Online Studios works closely with Bethesda's loremasters to negotiate what does and doesn't work for *The Elder Scrolls*.

"We can bounce ideas off the team down there, and they will tell us 'yup, you got it right' or 'nope, you got it wrong' or 'actually, dragons aren't in this time period,'" Lambert laughs at that. "That was a five year fight with me," he says referencing *ESO*'s past where dragons terrorised the Khajiit homeland of Elsweyr.

The *ESO* team certainly takes inspiration and direction from the loremasters at Bethesda, mining old adventures to inspire new ones, but it routinely puts an emphasis on the new. "I have a plan," Lambert says. "A roadmap that takes us out a long, long time." *ESO* may be telling a story 1,000 years in Tamriel's history, but it doesn't intend to be shackled to the past.

Lauren Morton

THE ESO TEAM TAKES INSPIRATION AND DIRECTION FROM THE LOREMASTERS

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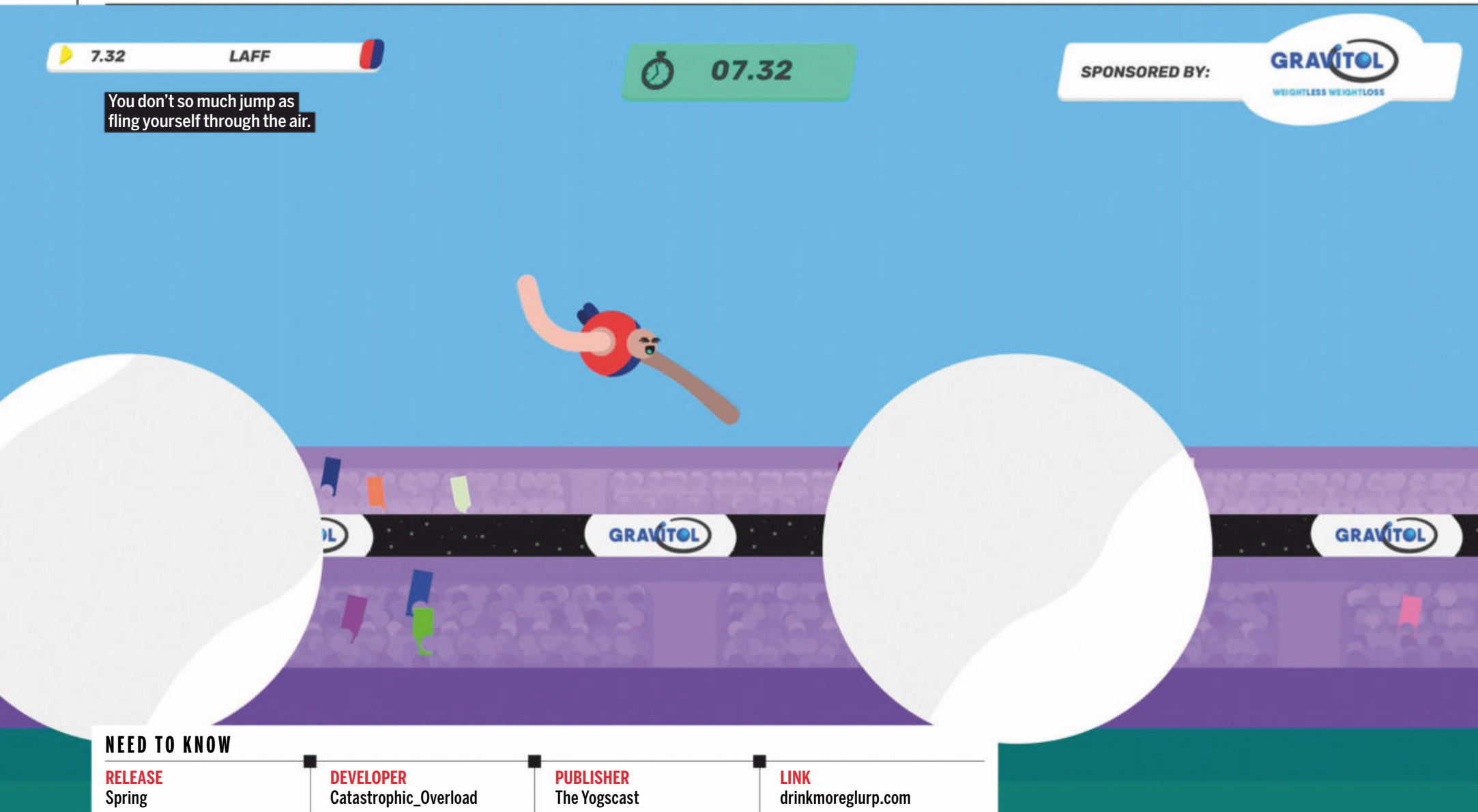


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PREVIEW

Drink More Glurp



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Spring

DEVELOPER
Catastrophic_Overload

PUBLISHER
The Yogscast

LINK
drinkmoreglurp.com

DRINK MORE GLURP

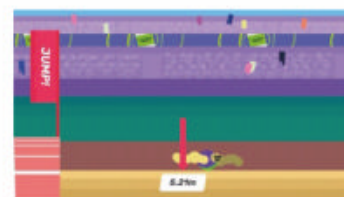
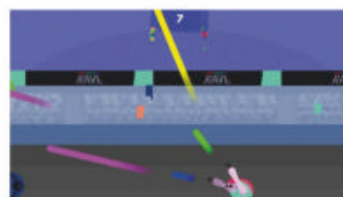
A game of hilarious defeats and serious victories

Decades after their original broadcast, TV signals carrying footage of the Olympics have reached an alien world, inspiring its bulbous, long-armed inhabitants to launch their own athletic event – and drown it in corporate sponsorship deals.

PLAYED IT

Designed for local multiplayer, *Drink More Glurp* mines comedy from a simple-yet-brutal control scheme and the cruelties of physics in a similar fashion to the likes of *QWOP* or *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*. Challenged to tackle everything from the sprint to the high jump to the hurdles, you propel your competitor along by whirling the sticks on your gamepad to rotate their arms and grabbing onto things with your floppy hands to climb.

You pass the pad around, each having a go at the round's event and hoping to add to your overall score. Instantly it's a perfect party game – watching your friends flail is hilarious, and all but the



most joyless players will laugh just as hard when it's their turn to look the fool.

GOOD SPORT

The game maintains its momentum by constantly varying up the events. Each round draws randomly from a deep pool of activities to keep you constantly on your toes. Simple goals mean you quickly understand what you need to do – the challenge, consistently, is working out *how* to do it, as a clumsy ball-man.

Further variety comes in the form of those corporate sponsorships. Each round's random advertiser imposes their own game-changing modifier. There's Gravitol, who turn down the gravity; Lard Sticks, who fatten up all the competitors; Master Cuffs, who chain your arms

IT CREATES A GENUINE ATMOSPHERE OF SPORTING ACHIEVEMENT

together; and enough more that I saw only a fraction over an hour or so of play.

Each has the power to turn an event on its head. A simple climb up a series of steps, for example, turns into a Herculean effort when the folks at Electromagnetic Rave decide to replace your gripping ability with the power to shoot lasers.

That's at the core of what makes *Drink More Glurp* a blast. Like *Mount Your Friends* before it, it draws you in with easy laughs, but by making the simple difficult it creates a genuine atmosphere of sporting achievement. Your athlete's such an awkward creature that it's not just hugely satisfying when you do succeed, you find yourself cheering when your competitors do too. The soundtrack of *Drink More Glurp* is the hoots and gasps of your friends, and when someone figures out a new trick, or overcomes the seemingly impossible, the mood is absolutely electric.

At the end of my session, the developer hands me a chunky plastic medal to celebrate my victory. And you know what? I really felt like I'd earned it.

Robin Valentine



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PREVIEW

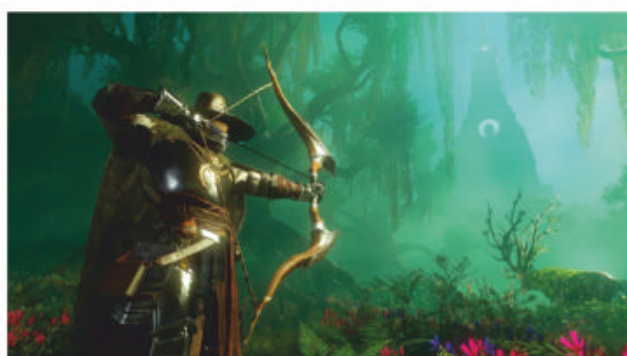
New World



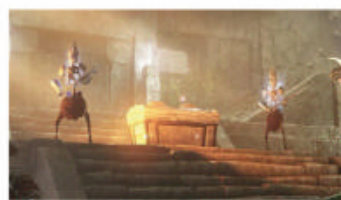
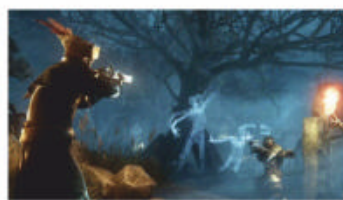
The developer promises huge-scale battles.



Gunpowder exists in this world.



Hunt animals and use the skins for crafting.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 26

DEVELOPER
Amazon Game Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
newworld.com

NEW WORLD

Amazon's attempts a new approach to massive multiplayer

Yes, retailer Amazon is getting into development, kicking things off with an MMORPG. Set in the 17th century during "the twilight of the Age of Exploration", the game mixes aspects of real-world history with fantasy, with thousands of players battling and working together to make a home on the dangerous, monster-ridden island of Aeternum.

The idea of an MMO feels almost old-fashioned in this age of shared-world shooters and battle royales, so I ask director Scot Lane from Amazon Game Studios why he thinks now is the right time to bring this genre back to life.

"Well, it sounded cool," he says. "But also because MMO development has slowed down. It's kind of interesting when everyone goes in one direction and you go in a different direction, right? We didn't want to follow. We also wanted to create a world that players can really get lost in. That, to me, is one of the top goals for this game. We want something you can play with friends, uncover mysteries, experience a world. I personally love playing MMOs because I can disappear into the fiction."

So how will players actually interact in *New World*? I ask Lane for examples of activities the game will offer, both large and small. "We have these massive battles," he says. "50 on 50, protecting forts, attacking them, warring over territory. The world hits back too. The monsters don't want you here and as you start to move in, they will push back."

"They invade your territory. Slowly at first, but then more quickly, and you have to step in and defend your land. Hundreds of AI will move in and try and take over your territory, which creates some cool social experiences."

But Lane says there will be less dramatic things to do in *New World* too, including owning a house that you can decorate and invite players into. And if you're the type of player who prefers adventuring alone, or playing with small groups, Lane says the game will have you covered as well. "We call that 'alone in a crowd' and a lot of MMO players are like that," he says. "They just want to play by themselves, but like knowing there are other people around, who they can maybe ask for help if they're struggling. We've actually put mechanics in to make it easier to get help if you're in trouble."

"We've also put a lot of quests in that cater to the single player, to the PvE player. And when I talked earlier about the AI trying to take back territory, some of this has been set up so that a single player can get involved. One person can make a difference in the world, which is really important to us."

FIRST LOOK

SWORD SWINGING

Combat is something Lane thinks will set *New World* apart from other games in the genre. "Most MMOs have a mouse cursor," he says. "You tab to highlight a target, then you manage cooldowns and percentages. That's cool, and I play those games. But our take is bringing action RPG combat in. It's physical-based. When I swing my sword, it has collision. My position in the world matters. I have to be the right distance from you. And every player has collision, so spacing matters."

"It's a different kind of skill-based combat. It's more visceral, more responsive. In a lot of MMOs, if someone's five levels ahead of you, you have no chance of defeating them. But in our game there is a chance. Levels absolutely give you power, but people who are good at action games will still have a shot."

After something of a lull for the genre, it's nice to see someone making a new MMO. But do people still have an appetite for them? I guess we'll find out next year.

Andy Kelly

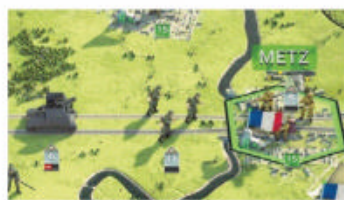


This town is very *Fable*-esque, isn't it?

"ONE PERSON CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD, WHICH IS REALLY IMPORTANT"

PREVIEW

Panzer Corps 2



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
March 19

DEVELOPER
Flashback Games

PUBLISHER
Slitherine Ltd

LINK slitherine.com/game/panzer-corps-2

PANZER CORPS 2

A wargame that recognises we all make mistakes

Sometimes all a game really needs is a good Undo button. Wargames can be intricate things, full of edge-case rules and surprising mechanics – how do bridges work, again? Can this unit attack after moving? The complications are myriad. The power to take back an accidental click, avoid a misunderstood mechanic, or dodge a dodgy combat resolution is powerful. Euphoric, even.

Friends, I write here today to say that *Panzer Corps 2* has a really good undo button. I recently got to sit down with a preview build of the game, courtesy of developers Flashback Games and publishers Slitherine, and I found the ability to take-backsies my way to victory not just useful, but thrilling. No amount of do-overs can make up for bad strategy, but mistakes get made – sometimes five moves ago – and the developers of *Panzer Corps 2* get that.

The upcoming sequel to 2011's *Panzer Corps*, which is itself a re-imagining of classic wargame series *Panzer General*. *Panzer Corps 2* continues that tradition, laying out a pretty fine-grained wargame that cares about small details, such as the difference between a Panzer III F and a Panzer IV Ausf D.

In its core combat, and the way a battle plays out, it stays true to the spirit of those earlier games. The biggest change for the second game in the series are the graphics, a leap from pixels and sprites to Unreal-powered 3D loveliness. It's a welcome upgrade, and the detail-oriented,

realistic art-style looks good in motion. The interface isn't quite as nice – blocky and obtrusive – though it's definitely better than most wargame fare.

Unlike many other operational-level World War II games, *Panzer Corps 2* lets the player build their army from the ground up. You start with picking a leader and their specialties. Mine, for example, was able to field more tanks and had trained their armoured divisions to overrun the enemy – but had a downside in refusing to field overstrength units. Regardless of specialty it's down to you to pick how many infantry divisions, or tanks, or planes you're going to field, and of what kind. The army units you choose stay with you from campaign to campaign, accruing veterancy, and you can upgrade their equipment as new tanks or transports become available.

ARMY MEN

Your army is limited by a total size, with units taking up varying amounts of slots – a single slot for a unit of bridge engineers, five or more for super-heavy railway artillery. You also generate a currency called 'prestige' as you take objectives and finish missions, and that's spent not only to get new units while deploying, but to reinforce existing units or bring in new units mid-operation. (You can also spend a premium for veteran reinforcements, which is a nice touch.)

The preview I played had me helm the invasions of Poland, Norway, and France. (In that order. A little odd, but okay. It's a preview.) Carrying a personalised army from map to map was a great touch, and the units felt like mine in a real, personal way that they don't often feel in wargames at this scale. I had picked each unit out of a large lineup, used it through multiple battles, and chosen specific heroes to accompany it.

By the end of the rather short campaign I had treasured veteran units, and my army makeup was remarkably different from the one a purely historical wargame would have provided. Other games may have simpler mechanics, or at least more elegant ones, but *Panzer Corps 2* delivers the experience of being a general like little else.

Jon Bolding

Storming Leningrad.



War, eh? Did anyone ever find out what it is good for?

THE PREVIEW HAD ME HELM THE INVASIONS OF POLAND, NORWAY, AND FRANCE



Lots of tanks to choose from.



Temtem

Temtem's first island has tropical beach vibes.



Max

You heard her, **Snout**. I bet I can blaze through Accademia she said, come visit me at the Dojo one day, loser!



You know the character creator's good when it lets you have pink and blue hair.

The blue bar indicates that Temtem's stamina.



Temtem



faster than you. Like



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£27.99

DEVELOPER
Crema

PUBLISHER
Humble Bundle

LINK
ks.playtemtem.com

TEMTEM

This MMO is bringing the Pokémon experience to PC

You've come of age. It's time to leave your hometown and explore the rest of the world, catching wild animals that roam the tall grasslands and battling other trainers. A professor gives you a starting critter and a piece of tech that logs all the wild creatures you come across. Sounds a bit familiar, right?

This is the opening of creature-collecting MMORPG *Temtem*, developed by Madrid-based studio Crema. It might be a tad on the nose, but after raising \$574,000 through Kickstarter (eight times the project goal) with over 10,000 backers, it's safe to say that there are players out there who want a *Pokemon* MMORPG – who can blame Crema for taking the opportunity? In fact, the game wears its inspiration on its sleeve with unapologetic pride.

Temtem's set on a group of islands called the Airborne Archipelago, and throughout your journey you'll visit all six and collecting their local Temtem. You begin your adventure by choosing one of three starters. In total, there are 12 different types of Temtem, from the classic elements of fire, water, wind, and earth, to other more intriguing ones like digital, crystal, and the slightly dubious mental. I pick Smazee, the melee monkey Temtem, purely because Professor Kostantinos says he won it in a pub brawl – good enough for me. But, before I even take one step out the door, Max, your designated rival, challenges me to a battle.

Alright buddy, if you're that keen, I'm ready to throw down.

The battle system is, unsurprisingly, similar to *Pokemon*. It's a 2v2 turn-based battle where you choose one out of four attacks, use items, and swap out teammates until you or your opponent is out of Temtem and needs to retreat. One difference in combat, which elevates it from its Nintendo counterpart, is that instead of having a limited amount of uses of each move, your Temtem has a stamina meter that depletes as you attack.

Naturally, the stronger the attack the more energy it takes to use, and most moves can take anywhere from a fifth of your Temtem's stamina to almost all of it in one swoop. You can also see the opposing Temtem's stamina meter, and a vital part of the strategy is planning around its depletion. This affects the way that battles play out, and makes you think about the pace of fights and focus on your opponent's moves instead of just spamming your most brutal abilities.

After defeating my rival it's time to explore the world and build up the ultimate Temtem team. As you wander the world, you hear bits and pieces of the setting's history and lore, hinting at a surprisingly deep backstory. Completing sidequests allows you to expand on these snippets. Exploring the world and defeating the dojo master to become the ultimate Temtem tamer was a given, but I wasn't expecting talk of airships, monks, laboratories, crystal mines, and erupting volcanos.

PLAYED IT

CHUNKY CHICKEN

Another highlight of *Temtem* is its MMO structure. Pressing the Tab key opens up a bunch of options that let you battle nearby players in casual or competitive modes, or even create a party for cooperative play. And honestly it's just fun seeing other players running around the world with their chosen Temtem following behind. It makes the world feel alive and busy.

Even in its Early Access form, there's already loads to do: islands to explore, online ranks to climb, and more than a hundred more Temtem to find. The full release isn't far off either, with the developer planning for May. Pokémon on your PC in 2020 – who saw that coming?

Rachel Watts

TEMTEM'S SET ON A GROUP OF ISLANDS CALLED THE AIRBORNE ARCHIPELAGO



This grassy patch hides a bunch of wild Temtem.

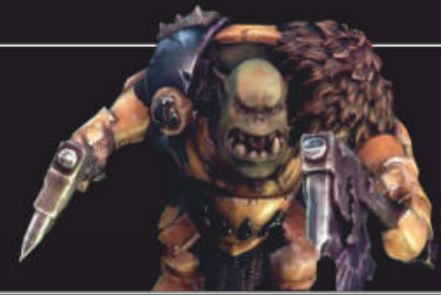
EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

Warhammer Underworlds: Online

Yep, that is an intimidating user interface.



Choose your warband wisely.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£23.99

DEVELOPER
Steel Sky Productions

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK warhammerunderworlds-online.com

WARHAMMER UNDERWORLDS: ONLINE

Games Workshop's brilliant deck-building spin-off goes digital

Deep in the cursed city of Shadespire, warbands battle for shards of precious shadeglass. The gold-clad knights known as the Stormcast Eternals, rampaging berserkers Magore's Fiends, a jolly band of Orcs called Ironskull's Boyz, and the skeletal Sepulchral Guard are the first warbands to brave this deadly treasure hunt.

Warhammer Underworlds is one of Games Workshop's best competitive tabletop games. You and your opponent's fighters activate one by one to defend, charge, and take points. After each activation you use 'ploys' from a hand of cards to perform extra special actions. These might let you give your fighters an extra move, or move enemy fighters into a worse position. This phase goes back and forth, creating a tactical card game after each board activation.

It's a fast and smart system that gives players plenty of opportunity to outwit one another. In adapting the game for PC, Steel Sky Productions has wisely decided to stick firmly to the original rules. Instead of models, we get some faithful 3D renderings of the warbands. Instead of game boards, we get environments that do a good job of emulating the grim atmosphere of the dead city.

Battles last about 20-30 minutes. Each takes three turns, and in each turn you get four character activations. If you have a

large warband like the seven-strong Sepulchral Guard, you have to think carefully about which four characters you want to activate – though the warband has some neat movement ploys that let you get more from your numbers. This puts a strong focus on making a few big, important decisions each turn. That often forces you to consider hitting objectives rather than enemies.

Even the objective system adds strategic nuance to your warband. In fact, it's essential to the way you choose to build your force. You draw three objectives per round from a deck you have chosen. Some objectives simply ask you to stand on a particular capture point, others might give you points for keeping enemy characters out of your territory, or for killing the enemy general, or for charging with every one of your characters in a turn. The team with the most glory at the end of three turns wins the game.

This creates fascinating standoffs. If you see a Sepulchral Guard player rush to take as many points as possible, you can guess at the objectives they're trying to score in their deck, and respond accordingly. If your opponent is charging recklessly for your leader, you might want to back away. Combats are resolved with simple dice rolls that are explained in the game's tutorials. Handy!

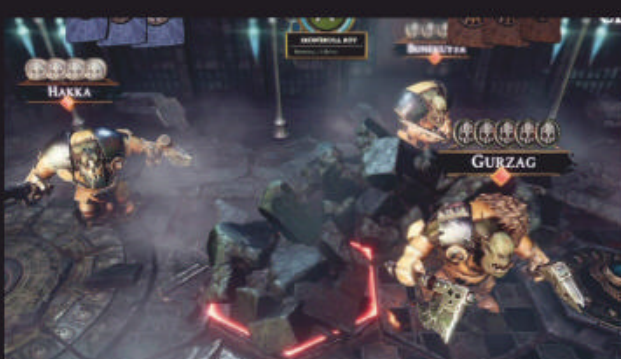
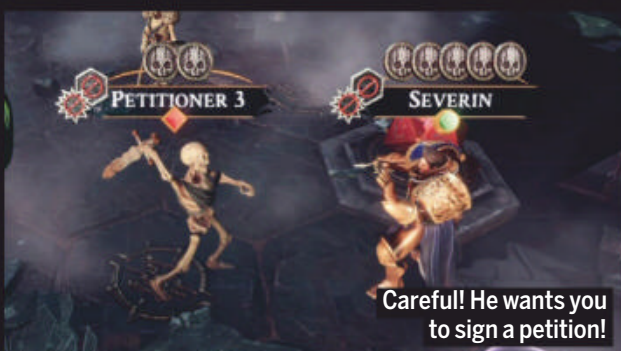
THROWING SHADE

The UI is initially baffling, but supplies most of the information you need once you're used to it. Though a few annoying exceptions, such as not being able to check your fighter's basic stats card in the middle of a game, or the lack of clarity over which symbols you're after for your attack rolls (some fighters hit on a sword icon, others with a hammer) definitely need fixing during the Early Access period.

Combat noises and extra sound cues will surely be added in time, but otherwise it's a nicely presented take on the original game with great potential as a competitive online experience. It's rare to see a game merge deckbuilding, tabletop tactics, dice and card combat into one combat system, but that's exactly what Warhammer Underworlds does, and there's loads of potential for future expansion.

Tom Senior

THE UI IS INITIALLY BAFFLING, BUT SUPPLIES MOST OF THE INFORMATION YOU NEED





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ADVERTORIAL

Magic: The Gathering - Theros Beyond Death

**“INSPIRED BY THE TIMELESS
MONSTERS AND LEGENDS OF
ANCIENT GREEK MYTHOLOGY”**

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

MAGIC: THE GATHERING - THEROS BEYOND DEATH takes the CCG to the depths of the underworld

When *Magic: The Gathering* first ventured into the world of Theros, inspired by the timeless monsters and legends of Ancient Greek mythology, it was one of the biggest, most ambitious expansions the card game had ever seen. It opened *Magic: The Gathering* into a fascinating new plane, defined by top-down design and enchantment-led play.

Now, the story of Theros continues with *Theros Beyond Death*. This sequel card set will venture into the celestial realm of Nyx, the underworld last explored by the planeswalker Elspeth Tirel in the second Theros expansion. The story will once again follow Elspeth as she

tries to escape this strange and frightening netherrealm.

For players, this means a full new 254-card set to get immersed in, with a focus on dual-coloured decks. The key new mechanic introduced in the set is Escape, which lets you cast certain spells from the graveyard for a cost (such as exiling several other cards from your graveyard), allowing you to bring your favourite tricks back from the beyond.

Even though *Theros Beyond Death* is an all-new set, it's not completely leaving behind its predecessor's lineage. Popular mechanics such as Constellation and Devotion make a return, as do enchantment creatures - the core mechanic that gave the Theros block its unique flow. These cards combine the rules of enchantment and

creature cards, representing the mysterious creatures known as 'Nyxborn' that originate from this ghostly realm.

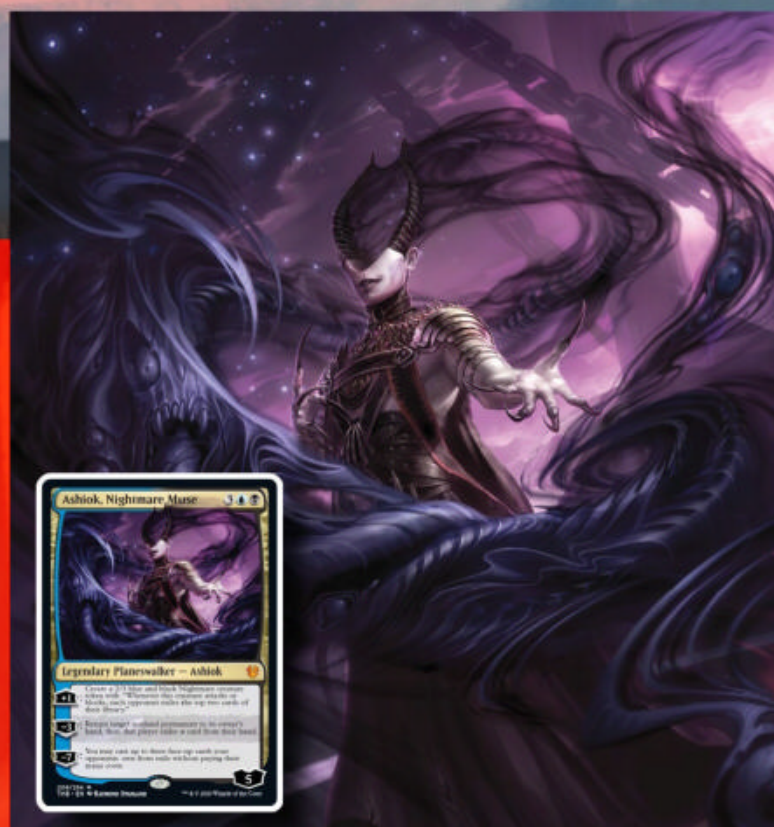
EPIC TALES

Theros Beyond Death will also draw on the recently-minted Sagas mechanic, first introduced in 2018's Dominaria set. Inspired by historic events throughout Theros and Nyx, these enchantment cards let you stack up abilities and damage boosts in 'chapters', culminating in a third and final chapter that will offer invaluable aid in battle. With *Theros Beyond Death* being a typically top-down set based around cool concepts and weird ideas, Sagas seem like a perfect thematic fit.

Within the set players will find five beautifully drawn full-art basic lands cards depicting the biomes of Nyx: Forest, Mountain, Plains, Island and Swamp, all rendered in a dreamy surreal aesthetic perfectly tailored for this nebulous setting.

The best bit is that you don't have to wait to begin exploring and fighting over the realm of Nyx. *Theros Beyond Death* is out now, both as a physical set for tabletop fans, and digitally in the online game *Magic: The Gathering: Arena*.

So sharpen your blades and hone your spells as you prepare to venture into one of *Magic: The Gathering's* most otherworldly realms. ■



FAR LEFT: Elspeth's story sees her breaking free of the underworld, only to be hunted by nefarious forces.

LEFT: Ashiok is a malevolent Planeswalker who spreads nightmares throughout Theros.

FULL AUTO

Meeting the excitable team
behind auto-battler spin-off
DOTA UNDERLORDS.

By Jon Bolding



Dota Underlords



sequestered well away from other game teams at Valve, the 30-odd people making *Dota Underlords* are having a lot of fun. They're loud and competitive, playing instruments on breaks from coding and jumping at the chance to down tools and

just play their game for a while. After a year of growth and work, they're preparing to release season one of *Underlords* this month – February 25. I visited the team, talked about their development, and got a look at what's new in the game's 1.0 version. What really struck me is that, approaching release, they're still in love with their game in a way unlike many other teams I've spoken to in games development. Even in a studio with a healthy work environment, one that doesn't crunch, the time before release is still fraught and stressful. The *Underlords* team seems to just want to keep making *Underlords*.

Dota Underlords is a standalone spinoff from the main game. It's inspired by a mod, *Dota Auto Chess*, that has gone on to spawn a whole new genre. A simple hook makes the hero-drafting gameplay of the new auto-battlers almost like a kind of strategic slot machine, fun both sitting at a desktop and on mobile. They're colourful games, forcing you to stay on your toes, but still offering downtime between rounds. Brad Muir, coder and designer on *Underlords*, feels just that way about it. "I'll go to the bathroom at round 12 and 13," he says, to laughter from his teammates. "Whatever, it's fine, I'm doing fine, I can just skip out on it and it's OK."

For a studio that makes notoriously innovative games making a spinoff from *Dota 2*, what is perhaps the most complex competitive game in the world today, Muir's attitude came as a surprise. But I shouldn't have been surprised. There's a lot that's unusual about *Dota Underlords*.

THE GAME THAT DOTA MADE

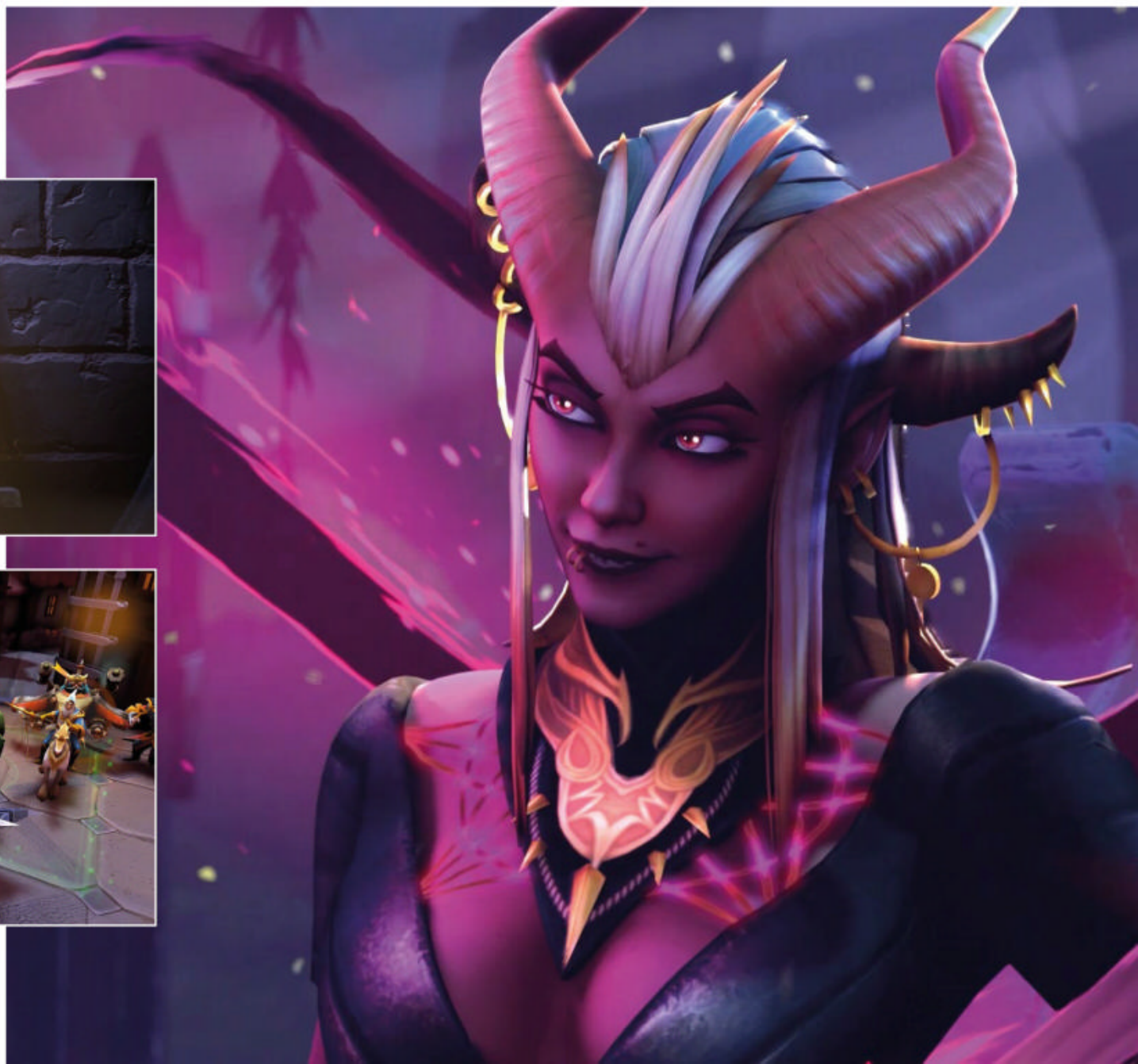
Valve is a company with a long-established method for choosing what games to make: if they see a good mod, they find a way to make it into a game. This is sincerely no exaggeration: *Team Fortress*, *Counter-Strike*, *Garry's Mod*, *Ricochet*, *The Ship*, *Day of Defeat*, *Alien Swarm*, and *Dota 2* all started as mods before becoming games either made or published by Valve.

So it should come as no surprise that Valve took notice when, in early 2019, a quirky custom mode for *Dota 2* was one of the most popular games in the world. In a flash, *Dota Auto Chess* had become the most popular *Dota* custom game ever made. Brad Muir reckons that from the numbers it was clear to Valve there was something going on. "It was really an outlier," he says, "Wow... yeah. There has to be something here." But it wasn't clear to everyone playing it what *Dota Auto Chess* was. It had an element of character-collecting RPGs to it, a flair for the random cribbed from gacha mobile games, but still very distinctly in the hero-driven strategy of the MOBA space. If you've played enough of them, it's clear the MOBA genre – itself spawned by the original mod *DOTA* – has given birth in turn. *Dota Auto Chess* was the first distinct game in what we now call a new genre: the auto-battler.

RIGHT: Late game battlefields become as complex as any MOBA teamfight.

BELOW: Your Underlord of choice joins your minions on the battlefield.

MUCH OF THE AUTO-BATTLER STRATEGY IS ABOUT TEAM COMPOSITION





FIRST FIRST LOOK

The early origins of Underlords



This is what the game looked like in February 2019 – the first working prototype that would become *Dota Underlords*. Even as it launched into a public beta, *Underlords* had no fully defined aesthetic principles. The

finished game takes Valve's *Dota* aesthetics to new levels – quite literally. The varied environments of the city of Whitespire are compact, detailed, and aesthetically pleasing in motion.

AUTO-BATTLER 101

In an auto-battler, players draft a team of characters from a shared pool, collecting multiple copies of the same character to increase the overall power of that specific character. Characters with similar traits form alliances, and these alliances give new powers to your team. Building a team is only half the game, but it's the half you have control over.

Each round of the game you're matched up against a random opponent and your team automatically fights the other team in real time – like a MOBA teamfight – and the only bearing you have on this is giving each unit a starting position on the board.

Much of auto-battler strategy is about team composition and hoping for a lucky draw from the hero pool while you're drafting. For example, combining tough knights with versatile healers in *Underlords* gives your team a strong front line that can sustain against heavy punishment from the enemy – but might suffer against the burst damage and mobility of enemy assassins.

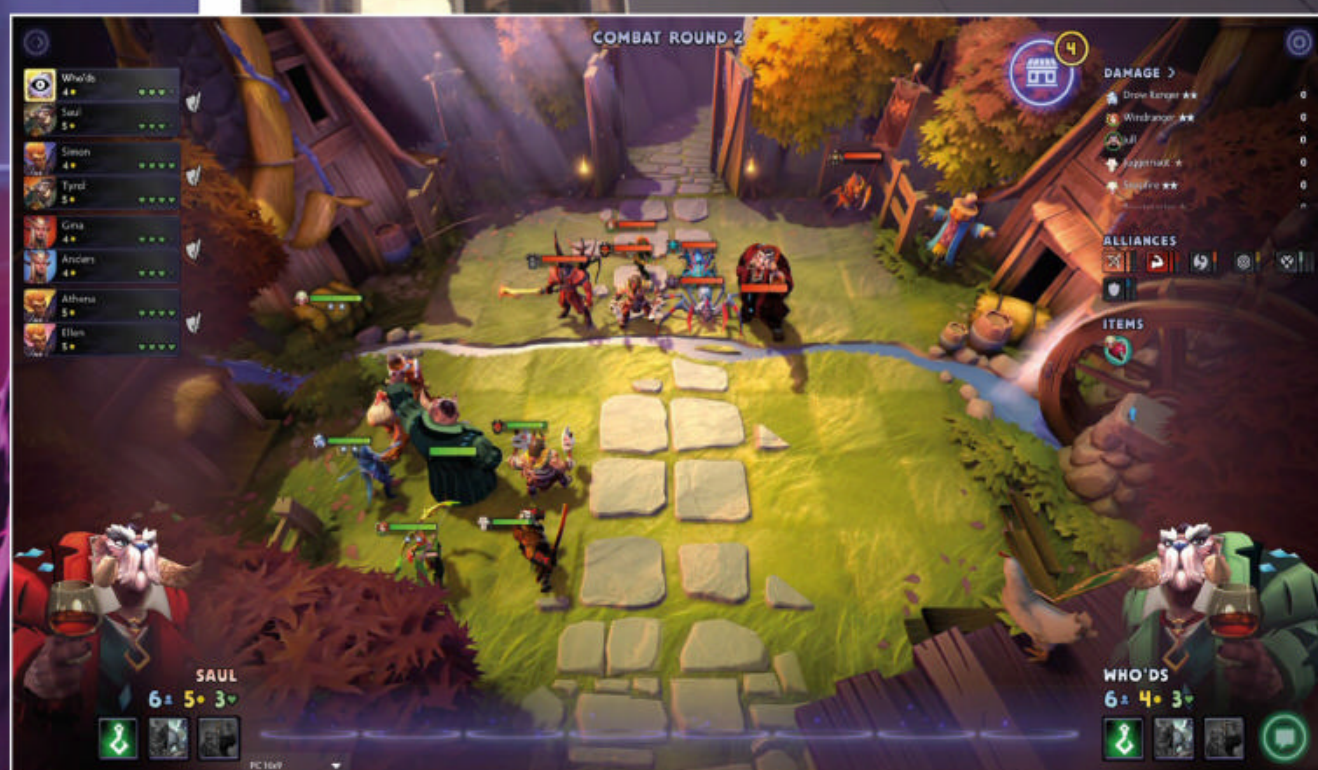
That's OK, though, because the truly compelling thing about autobattlers is that they're fast-paced. If you lose, well, maybe next time you'll get better draws, or your

automated combatants will pick better enemy targets. They're perfect for relaxed gaming and mobile sessions – so perfect, in fact, that the developers on the *Underlords* team were motivated to get the Source 2 engine working on mobile devices.

The auto-battler is a genre that is so new that the name doesn't even have a standard grammar. Auto-battler, auto battler, and autobattler are all common. Valve's Steam page for *Dota Underlords* doesn't even use the term, instead calling the game a "strategy battler".

FLAT OUT

If you don't already know, Valve has a self-organising, flat company structure. Employees choose where and on what team to work, and there are no titles like 'team head' or 'lead designer' on anyone's desk.





The team naturally coalesces around the project. If a project doesn't have enough momentum with a group to happen then it doesn't happen at all. *Dota Underlords* certainly has momentum.

"Ultimately, a bunch of people here were playing *Auto Chess* a lot," says Lawrence Yang, a UX specialist who became a designer on *Underlords*.

Another developer interjects, "We played... a lot of the game," says Adrian Finol. Finol has been with Valve since the *Half-Life 2* days, he's a game designer and programmer. "And it's Valve, right?" he says, "so we looked at the numbers, and we looked at the desire of making it here, how many people wanted to work on it." And that was it. There were

CRAWL SPACE

Missions in the new City Crawl mode



1 Street Fights are short battles against an AI opponent, taking an existing army and seeing if you can figure out how to deploy it to best gain victory.

2 Objectives send you into the Knockout or Standard game modes, either against humans or the AI, to try and get a particular achievement.

3 Puzzles are open-ended challenges where you build an army to defeat an enemy setup. They tickle the part of my brain that loves to beat the system.

LEFT: *Underlords'* slick UI clues you in to important information, like which heroes are upgrades or allies.

BOTTOM: Jull is a walrus man who is also a bootlegger. Character of the year.

enough people interested in working on *Underlords*, so off to the races it went. Valve initially approached the *Dota Auto Chess* modders, the China-based Dmodo Studio, for a collaboration. The two studios ultimately had different visions for the design of the game, and amicably decided to go their separate ways.

Which meant there was now definitely an internal Valve team making what would become *Dota Underlords*. From six people the team slowly grew to its current size of about 30. Engineers laid the first framework of the game, then designers started to iterate on the mechanics, UX joined, interface designers, then artists and modellers. The final team was fun-loving and loud, an ethos that shows in *Underlords* itself. It has a comedy to it, something that *Dota 2* has, but amplified.

The team has really embraced a design philosophy of customisation for the players, trying out new things in the process. And that's not something which is very easy in a brand new game genre.

That's not to say it was all perfect. A vocal community of millions had formed around the new genre, and the decision to involve that community with their development would make turmoil for the team. Further, Valve was still shadowed by the high-profile failure of card game *Artifact*, the prior *Dota 2* spinoff.

LORDING IT UP

Making a game in a genre that nobody really understands yet isn't easy. *Underlords* officially had a development team in February 2019, just about a month after the new genre had a name. Adrian Finol was cautiously optimistic about the challenge. "I wouldn't say it was scary," says Finol. "More like, you know, uncharted."

"I would say the word scary," says Muir, laughing, "I would say that." It wasn't an unreasonable fear. *Dota Auto Chess* had some 8.5 million downloads to its name, a number bigger than most full game releases.

There was clearly some magic, but no single designer could perfectly encapsulate it. "What is it?" says Muir. "Is it like, this perfect thing, and if you start tinkering with it it's gonna all come crashing down? Is it a house of cards? Or is it a solid foundation that's resilient that you can build on? We didn't know. Until we started pulling the Jenga pieces out."

So the team went to work, trying to figure out what was essential to the game and what they could do without. What they could twist, or change, or add. What was the nascent genre missing? What was everyone enjoying so much about it, and how could that be amplified? The vision for *Underlords* called for a more complex and strategic autobattler than had yet been made, one that gave players more control over their fate rather than relying on random item drop chances or lucky draws from the draft pool to determine victory.

The team was empowered to try new prototypes, new concepts, and new formats. Internally, Valve seems to prize and focuses on attempting radical changes to the established concepts of a game.

Underlords was tested with five character teams, rather than ten, which turned out to be boring and felt restrictive. However, testing that concept later gave rise to the fast-playing Knockout mode, which starts players off with five pieces on the board and has them grow from

A VOCAL COMMUNITY OF MILLIONS HAD FORMED AROUND THE NEW GENRE



Dota Underlords

there. Knockout has proven pretty popular with players, but it wasn't always like that. "Honestly, the first Knockout playtest was terrible," says Muir. Bad enough that he wasn't excited for the second one... where the new mechanics suddenly really clicked for the team.

Yang is clear about the benefits of prototyping and the freedom to try new things, which he attributes to Valve's structure. "Scary or liberating or anything, all the teams at Valve, we're not really beholden to upper management or anything to make any of these decisions," he says. "So all the teams are doing their best to make a fun game, and making the best decisions to make customers happy, so from that perspective it's exactly like all the other teams at Valve and all the other games that we've made. It just so happens that this time it's a completely new genre. So there are a lot more unknowns."

There was, however, a key difference from past Valve games. After it released into beta in June 2019, *Dota Underlords* would be developed actively, in the public eye, in full conversation with its community, as no Valve game before it had ever been.

VALVE TIME

Valve is notorious for not delivering things when promised. 'Valve Time' is a running gag for gamers of a certain generation, a warped place where *Team Fortress 2*'s 1999 release date can silently stretch all the way to 2007 and involve a complete redesign.

Dota Underlords was not developed on Valve Time. *Dota Underlords* was developed in real time. "I think we finally killed Valve Time," says Finol. The *Underlords* beta featured a prominent feedback button that went right to the team's inboxes. Finol explained why this particular game got the public treatment. "I think it was mostly from how fast we were building it. We knew that we were moving fast, because we were excited to work on it, and we wanted to get it out. I think at the end of the day it ended clear that we cannot develop this on our own. We need a bunch of people on our side to tell us how they are going to play this game." That

feedback was crucial. Muir's fears about pulling Jenga pieces from the game design could be allayed by the massed experience of the players, many of whom had already played hundreds of hours in *Dota Auto Chess*.

The constant dialogue with players over new features added to the game took Valve's private prototype development public. The fans got to see the ups and downs of game design, like when a fix seems perfect but goes wrong. A persistent problem with auto-battlers is that an unchanging roster of characters gets stale quickly. The Jail was developed to counteract that: every day a few characters get thrown in and aren't available. The developers and community loved the idea. Once implemented, it was chaotic. A day was too little time to quickly grasp how the new mix of characters worked, or worse, the randomly chosen removals for that day caused chaotically overpowered combos to emerge in the absence of their counters. The jail, once everyone's favourite idea, was gone within two months.

User feedback was also a burden, at times. It was hard to try riskier changes because of the chance that a lot of the player base would react poorly – and energy was spent managing upset players when it would have been better spent developing the game.

RIGHT: The *Underlords*' ultimate abilities often make or break a fight.

BOTTOM: Irish pixie Hobgen is an enthusiastic pyromaniac.

THE JAIL, ONCE EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE IDEA, WAS GONE WITHIN TWO MONTHS





In a year, through the ups and downs, from genre invention in January 2019, then development from February 2019 to present, *Dota Underlords* took shape and prepared to release.

GOING SOLO

"I think we're much better at making this game now than we were," says Finol when asked what had changed in the last year and if he'd take anything back, "and we had to go through all these steps to get to where we are now."

The release season of *Dota Underlords* is exciting work, featuring the genre's first real single-player campaign: The City Crawl. *Underlords*' story in the *Dota* world, by Valve house writer Steve Jarros, revolves around the death of crime boss Mama Eeb and the struggle to take her place at the top of Whitespace city's crime network. The City Crawl missions are particularly intriguing in their originality and modular, branching presentation. It's very likely to be the most beginner-friendly auto-battler yet because it has a wide variety of fully pausable single-player experiences to learn the ropes with.

Some of that campaign is free to everyone, though most of the single-player stages are only available to those who purchase the game's battle pass. As you might expect, the season one battle pass will also include various cosmetic items unlocked through play. The art we're shown during our visit feels well above the standards of *Dota 2*'s already impressive items – the art style really shines when set free of the relatively static world of the top-down MOBA battlefield. *Dota Underlords* is free to cross-play across Steam, iOS, and Android; recently received a fourth Underlord – Enno; and officially launches out of Early Access into 1.0 on February 25. ■

TIS THE SEASON

What to expect from the first post-Early Access season

The \$4.99 battle pass has over 75 rewards such as banners, Rocky the Ravenhook comics, skins, and props to litter your combat arena with. Other players will also now see your customised arena when they come to fight you.

Summoners are here: Arc Warden and Nature's Prophet return as part of this new alliance, while Lycan, Venomancer, and Broodmother regain their summoning powers and switch to it.



Say goodbye to Scrappy Inventors, as those alliances are taking the season off. (And not a moment too soon.)



It's still undecided, but the team hopes to have three to four seasons per year.

Of course this Valve game has sprays. Of course it does.

The top battle pass reward is ultimate skins for the Underlords.

Other Heroes, Alliances, and Items will rotate to keep the roster fresh.

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PC GAMER

2020

PREVIEW

Looking ahead to
another great year
of PC gaming

CYBERPUNK 2077

RELEASE September 17 | DEV CD Projekt RED | PUB In-house | LINK [cyberpunk.net](https://www.cyberpunk.net)

In some ways, it's hard to know what more to say about the *Witcher* developer's upcoming sci-fi RPG. Yes, it still looks slick as hell. Yes, it's still the most highly anticipated game we've seen in years. And yes, we still reckon it'll be something seriously special.

It's been so many years of breathless anticipation that it's surreal to think that – despite another delay, from April to September – *Cyberpunk 2077* is actually, finally coming out this year. Before you know it, we'll be driving around the streets

of Night City in a swanky future sports car, hopping out to blast away gangsters, hack people's brains, and get foot-long blades surgically inserted in our arms.

Various pre-release controversies have exposed that the setting is probably less thoughtful than we'd initially hoped – the philosophical and social implications of a dystopian world seem to be taking a backseat to the rule of cool.

But hey, at least they're committed to that rule. We'd struggle to think of many things cooler than Keanu Reeves living in your head, for example. The question now is, how cyberpunk will our PCs need to be to run this beast?

WE'LL BE DRIVING AROUND THE STREETS OF NIGHT CITY IN A SWANKY FUTURE SPORTS CAR



Hey buddy, wanna buy a weird robot?

TELL ME WHY

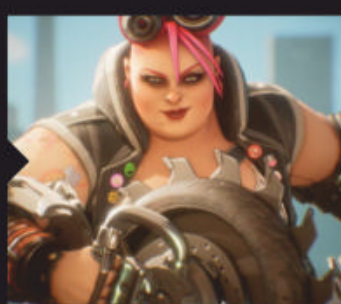
The *Life is Strange* developer's latest project centres on the unique bond between two siblings, one of whom is transgender. It'll take place over three chapters, but they're all releasing at once this summer.

RELEASE: Summer

BLEEDING EDGE

This 4v4 hero brawler from Ninja Theory makes us think of a melee version of *Overwatch*: noisy and chaotic team-based matches filled with colourful, over-the-top characters with some wild abilities.

RELEASE: March 24



ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS

A confident follow-up ready to surpass its predecessor for visual splendour. The *Metroidvania* exploration looks great, but the slick animation is the star of the show.

RELEASE: March 11

GRIFTLANDS

An RPG where combat and negotiation play out as a card game. It's like *Slay the Spire* only with more story and gorgeous cartoon art. Takes place in a sci-fi junktown full of slugfolk and dog-people.

RELEASE: Autumn



HUMANKIND

RELEASE 2020 | DEV Amplitude Studios | PUB Sega | LINK humankind.game

Grand strategy from the developer of PC Gamer favourites *Endless Space* and *Endless Legend*, *Humankind's* style of historical nation-building is a pretty clear challenge to *Civilization's* throne. A notable difference is *Humankind's* single victory

condition: being the coolest empire on the planet. As your cities progress through distinct ages, incorporating new cultural ideas or clinging onto traditional customs, you'll accrue Fame points for achievements such as constructing world wonders or taking part in legendary battles.



EMPIRE OF SIN

RELEASE Autumn | DEV Romero Games | PUB Paradox Interactive | LINK empireofsin.game.com

Start a mafia and help America's underworld prosper during prohibition. Like the classic *Gangsters: Organized Crime*, *Empire of Sin* makes you a mob boss with a growing empire to nurture. As the head honcho you'll run rackets, raid rivals'

properties and deal with the cops by paying them off or fighting them in the streets in turn-based battles. You'll also need to put together a crew who develop as you play, gaining relationships, personality traits, or even an STD from hanging around brothels, just like Mr Capone himself.



MOUNT & BLADE 2: BANNERLORD

RELEASE March | DEV Taleworlds Entertainment | PUB In-house | LINK taleworlds.com

It's finally coming out! After so many years in development, this sequel promises to deepen our favourite janky sandbox medieval sim with vastly improved graphics, more strategic combat, and an overall much deeper simulation of medieval kingdoms and their

constantly feuding nobles. Whether you want to take over the world with your all-conquering army, build a merchant empire selling flour and beef, or travel around testing your skills in jousting tournaments, *Bannerlord* promises to cater to almost any playstyle you can imagine.



A TOTAL WAR SAGA: TROY

RELEASE 2020 | DEV Creative Assembly Sofia | PUB Sega | LINK totalwar.com/games/troy

The second *Total War Saga*, or third since *Fall of the Samurai* has been rebranded, mixes myth and fantasy in Bronze-Age Greece and Anatolia. *Troy* is based on the epic Homeric poem, *The Iliad*, along with other myths, but explores the conflict between the

Hellenic kingdoms and the Trojans through the lens of history. There's even a minotaur, but it's really a massive bloke wielding an axe. On the battlefield, you'll fight with legendary heroes, while units will have new abilities and the maps themselves will include obstacles like mud.

BIOMUTANT

This post-apocalyptic RPG starring a furry little raccoon-thing features... well, everything, from crafting, to customisable mutant powers, to kung-fu combat, to mech suits. No lack of ambition here.

RELEASE: 2020



SABLE

A long-awaited contemplative exploration game where you traverse an infinite desert on customisable speeder bikes, spelunking through the ruins of a lost civilisation. It looks absolutely sublime.

RELEASE: 2020

DESPERADOS 3

Fans of the original series and the more recent *Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun* will feel right at home with this real-time stealth strategy game set in the rootin'-tootin' days of the Old West.

RELEASE: 2020

DISINTEGRATION

At the helm of this new tactical FPS is Marcus Lehto, a key player in the development of the *Halo* series. Set on Earth in the near future, the gimmick here is your gravcycle: a flying vehicle loaded with lots of guns.

RELEASE: 2020

Reginiting the age-old conflict between snakes and babies.

CRUSADER KINGS III

RELEASE 2020 | DEV Paradox Interactive | PUB In-house | LINK crusaderkings.com

The sequel to Paradox's enduring grand strategy RPG has big shoes to fill, what with its predecessor giving us nearly a decade of weird medieval drama and murder. So much murder.

It looks promising, though, with the developers leaning into its RPG proclivities even more. Characters will have RPG-style progression, as will the dynasties they hail

from, and deviating too much from your ruler's personality could make them snap.

Crusader Kings II has evolved and grown over years, but it looks like we won't need to give much of it up. *CKIII* will include most of its predecessor's features, including all the religions and cultures playable from the start, and the map's four times the size. It covers the same geographic areas, but the whole thing has been hugely expanded with new detail and less abstraction.

**CHARACTERS
WILL HAVE
RPG-STYLE
PROGRESSION,
AS WILL THE
DYNASTIES
THEY HAIL
FROM**

GEARS TACTICS

Gears of War meets *XCOM* in this turn-based spin-off. The isometric tactical view suits the series' trademark cover-shooting surprisingly well, and it seems like it'll have some real strategic depth.

RELEASE: April 28



SPIRITFARER

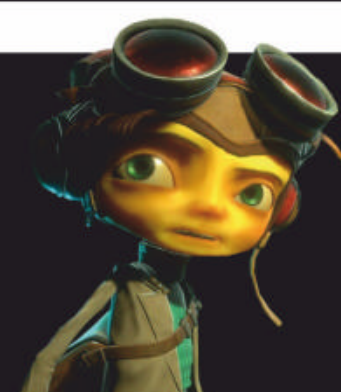
A charming indie adventure that casts you as a ferrymaster transporting spirits to the afterlife. Manage the ship, take care of the passengers, and hear their heartfelt stories before they pass on.

RELEASE: 2020

PSYCHONAUTS 2

Raz and his oddball pals are back, diving into people's dreams to confront their deepest fears. Despite it being 15 years since the first, the platformer will pick up right where the last game left off.

RELEASE: 2020



Vampires are very fashionable, you see.

VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE: BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2020 | DEV Hardsuit Labs | PUB Paradox Interactive | LINK bloodlines2.com

Picking up 16 years after the cult-classic original, *Bloodlines 2* moves the action from the gritty streets of LA to the corporate towers of Seattle, where new money rules and the power of the Camarilla no longer commands respect.

The game promises a more robust character creator than the first *Bloodlines*, with new powers, factions, and

'resonances' adopted from the tabletop game that confer special buffs through blood, while political upheaval provides unlimited opportunities for upstarts and newly-turned vampires bold and ambitious enough to take what they want. Living up to the *Bloodlines* legend will be tough, but developer Hardsuit Labs appears to be taking the job seriously: *Bloodlines 2* was initially slated to come out in March, but has been delayed to an unspecified date later this year.

LIVING UP TO THE BLOODLINES LEGEND WILL BE TOUGH

CARRION

Horror with a twist: you play the monster. As a sort of gory death-blob, your goal is to escape a secret underground facility – and devour every scientist and soldier who stands in your way.

RELEASE: 2020



DYING LIGHT 2

An ambitious sequel that steps beyond the scope of the first game by offering an apocalyptic world that will dramatically change as a result of your decisions. And yes, you can still do sick parkour.

RELEASE: 2020

HAVEN

An RPG adventure that follows two lovers as they begin their new life on a mysterious alien planet. Play as both characters simultaneously or go for co-op if you want to play with your special someone.

RELEASE: 2020

ODDWORLD: SOULSTORM

This retelling of Abe's *Exodus* is looking different than other games in the 25-year-old series – despite the traditional 2D plane it has a massive, sprawling game world and there's crafting in it too.

RELEASE: 2020



HALF-LIFE: ALYX

RELEASE March | DEV Valve | PUB In-house | LINK half-life.com/en/alyx

It still doesn't seem quite real. After years of waiting, Valve's finally decided to make a new *Half-Life*. It's not a continuation of Gordon's misadventures, so we'll still have to wait to find out what happens after *Episode 2*, but *Half-Life: Alyx* is exciting for other reasons. Set

between the first two games, it's a VR outing featuring Alyx Vance. No more mute protagonist! Valve also promises that, despite not being a sequel, it will still push the story of *Half-Life* forward. Being a VR exclusive does mean a lot of *Half-Life* fans are going to need to invest in new hardware.



RESIDENT EVIL 3

RELEASE April 3 | DEV Capcom | PUB In-house | LINK residentevil.com/re3/uk

After the success of last year's superb *Resident Evil 2* remake, Capcom is continuing the series with a new version of its third PlayStation-era game. Following Jill Valentine's attempts to escape from a zombie-ravaged Raccoon City, the studio says this one won't

stick as closely to the source material as the *RE2* remake did. Which, honestly, is fine: *Resident Evil 3* was far from a classic. But we love the idea of revisiting a more detailed, three-dimensional Raccoon City, which we only caught a few glimpses of in the last remake.



DEATH STRANDING

RELEASE Summer | DEV Kojima Productions | PUB In-house | LINK kojimaproductions.jp/en

Kojima's bizarre delivery-man simulator is already out on consoles, but its PC release will likely make this gorgeous game even more stunning. Though it's not for everyone, there's a real charm to *Death Stranding*'s photorealistic landscapes, haunting

atmosphere, and weird-as-hell story. It's also deeply rewarding to spend time building structures that you know will appear in other players' games, making their journeys a easier, and there's a kind of genius to turning package delivery into a tense (literal) balancing act.



WATCH DOGS: LEGION

RELEASE 2020 | DEV Ubisoft | PUB In-house | LINK watchdogs.ubisoft.com/game/en-ca

Ubisoft's latest seems crazy ambitious. The gist is that you can play as any NPC, so long as you first recruit them to your shadowy organisation. Every NPC in the world has a simulated life, including traits and relationships, that you can use to your

advantage. There are consequences, though. Get a character killed and they'll be dead forever. What's worse, their family and friends might resent your organisation. *Watch Dogs* was a pretty good open-world action game, but *Legion* looks an exciting step forward.

COOK SERVE DELICIOUS 3

Cook delicious meals for your hungry customers while driving your food truck across a near-apocalyptic future USA. Aims to fix the problems of the disappointing second game, and put a greater focus on story.

RELEASE: Autumn



GODFALL

Godfall promises melee action for up to three co-op players, with *Monster Hunter*-level armour and buckets of loot. With *Borderlands* developer Gearbox taking the publishing role, of course there's loot.

RELEASE: December

MINECRAFT DUNGEONS

Grab three friends and venture into *Minecraft*'s familiar blocky world with a dungeon crawling twist. Loot wondrous treasures and beef up your arsenal of weapon enchantments as you combine your powers.

RELEASE: April





MARVEL'S AVENGERS

RELEASE Sept 4 | DEV Crystal Dynamics | PUB Square Enix | LINK bit.ly/38hq9C5

With their faces tweaked just enough to avoid resembling Chris Hemsworth, Robert Downey Jr, and friends, the disgraced Avengers assemble to improve their public opinion polling and defeat an army of robots in single-player and co-op brawls.

Avengers' visual resemblance to the movies hasn't helped it but performing aerial Iron Man stunts and chucking cars around as Hulk has inherent appeal. The trick will be making every member of the team fun to play, despite their wildly varying power sets – that'll be no mean feat.

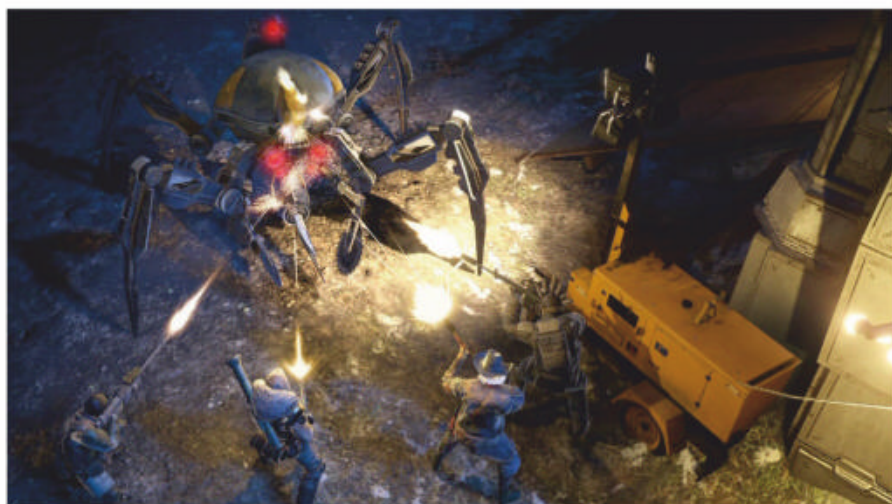


XENONAUTS 2

RELEASE 2020 | DEV Goldhawk Interactive | PUB In-house | LINK xenonauts.com

The series we like to call 'XCOM, PhD' will go into Early Access sometime this year. A beta build has already been circulating among Kickstarter backers, and from the look of it, this sequel is much the same game: a gritty, sandboxy resurrection of the original

X-COM that includes an air combat metagame, multiple bases, and protracted fights where you're commanding as many as ten soldiers. If you get nostalgic about getting gunned down on the ramp of your Skyraider on turn one, this is the game for you.



WASTELAND 3

RELEASE May 19 | DEV inXile Entertainment | PUB Deep Silver | LINK wasteland3.com

Whe famed Desert Rangers head to the snowbound climes of post-apocalyptic Colorado for this squad-based isometric RPG sequel. Things go sideways quickly, though, leaving the party stranded and alone in a very unfriendly neighbourhood. You'll

need to recruit a new squad, build up your base, and interact with factions including cults, gangs, and raiders, as well as folks just trying to live their lives. In a first for the series, drop-in, drop-out multiplayer will enable two players to control separate squads simultaneously.



KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM 2

RELEASE Spring | DEV Star Theory | PUB Private Division | LINK kerbalspaceprogram.com

This sequel to the 96%-scoring spaceflight sim is being developed by a new team, Star Theory, made up of hardcore *Kerbal* fans. As well as a dramatic visual overhaul, *Kerbal 2* will introduce two exciting new ways to play: colony building and interstellar travel.

You can now leave your home system behind and travel to other star systems. And everything, including building massive interstellar ships, is all rooted in real science. As for what we'll find out there in the universe, Star Theory is keeping that an intriguing secret for now.

OOBLETS

The word 'cuddly' comes to mind when describing *Ooblets*, maybe because nearly everyone is wearing bulky knit sweaters. Think *Stardew Valley*, but you grow cute little monster friends instead of vegetables.

RELEASE: 2020



DARK ALLIANCE

Action-RPG *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* is making a comeback. It's dropped the *Baldur's Gate* setting, however, as well as console exclusivity, and the action's moved to the chilly Icewind Dale.

RELEASE: 2020

GODS & MONSTERS

Battle mythical creatures like hydras, cyclops, and gorgons as you attempt to save the Greek gods from Typhon, a giant legendary serpent, in this adventure from the creators of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*.

RELEASE: Autumn

RAINBOW SIX: QUARANTINE

While this co-op shooter takes after *Rainbow Six: Siege* in some ways, expect more Left 4 Dead-style zombie massacring than cautious breaching, as seen in *Siege's* Outbreak event.

RELEASE: 2020



Is it a bird? Is it a plane? It's the second one.

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

RELEASE 2020 | DEV Asobo Studio1 | PUB Xbox Game Studios | LINK flightsimulator.com

When a Microsoft rep told us the whole world was in this reboot of its flagship flight simulator, we didn't believe them. Then they let us play it, and we realised we could drop a pin anywhere on the planet and fly there, from the Grand Canyon to your own home town.

And then there's the dynamic weather and volumetric clouds, which combine to

create some stunning scenery. Flying through a thunderstorm, rain streaking across your windshield, is genuinely terrifying. While previous *Microsoft Flight Simulator* games have mostly been about the cold, functional reality of flight, this new game is much more atmospheric, with the production values you'd expect from an AAA blockbuster.

And thanks to a variety of assists, if you want to play it with an Xbox controller while slumped on the sofa, you can.

FLYING THROUGH A STORM, RAIN STREAKING ACROSS YOUR WINDSHIELD, IS TERRIFYING

STAR RENEGADES

A promising hands-on last year revealed a game of striking pixel-art and tense turn-based battles. It's almost *Into The Breach*-esque – you know what your enemy's about to do, but how do you counter it?

RELEASE: 2020



LAIR OF THE CLOCKWORK GOD

Swap between two characters, one a point-and-click adventurer, the other a platformer, as you try to prevent several apocalypses from happening at once.

RELEASE: 2020

HALO INFINITE

The PC is missing *Halo 5*, but we'll take a new one. We don't know much yet except that Infinite's powered by the fancy new Slipspace Engine. Based on some super limited teasers, it's going to look really good.

RELEASE: December







AGAINST ALL ODDS

Amid government censorship and turbulent market trends, China's vibrant indie scene is fighting for survival.

By Steven Messner

West of the neon towers of Shanghai's Pudong district, along the Wusong River that winds through a much quieter part of the city, a few hundred developers are challenging the conventions that define China's unparalleled \$33 billion videogame industry. In a market defined by free-to-play online games, the term 'indie' doesn't mean much to a lot of Chinese gamers.

But that doesn't stop over 10,000 attendees from gathering on the first floor of the enormous Shanghai Convention and Exhibition Center of International Sourcing to showcase Chinese indie games. Called WePlay Game Expo, this conference is the only one of its kind in China – a haven for a fledgling indie scene whose future depends almost entirely on the regulations of China's government and, surprisingly, a Seattle-based company: Valve.

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FEATURE

Against All Odds

» Though China has more gamers than anywhere else in the world (roughly 800 million), its industry is also the least diverse. Free-to-play mobile, and PC games – most oozing with pay-to-win schemes and loot boxes – have reigned supreme since online gaming exploded in the mid-2000s. But WePlay Game Expo and the developers who attend it are looking to change that.

It's like a miniature version of PAX West, the American game convention that invades downtown Seattle each August. Though there are a few big-budget, international games (a 2K Games booth sporting the divine visage of *Borderlands 3*'s iconic Psycho greets me as I walk in), deeper into the swell of the crowd is where the coolest stuff is.

Near the middle of the hall, a pair of *Touhou* cosplayers struggle to control adorable robots in a game called *Biped*. I'm drawn in by the cutesy aesthetic, but *Biped* quickly reveals itself as a sinister cross between *QWOP* and *Overcooked*, a co-op puzzle platformer where the simple act of moving requires an uncommon level of dexterity. Just a few years ago, an event like this in China would have been impossible.

WINDS OF CHANGE

I met up with Wesley Bao, the founder of Coconut Island Games, one of China's few independent publishers and developers, and he estimates that only a tiny fraction of China's 800 million gamers regularly buy indie games.

Bao himself wasn't even aware of the concept of 'indie' as an aesthetic or game development culture until years after Coconut Island's founding. "Coconut Island started in 2009, and at that time all the games in China were MMORPGs or online web browser games," he says. "Those



LEFT: Obviously inspired by *Dark Souls*, *I Love Eastern Exorcists* gloomy hand-painted aesthetic.

RIGHT: Each scene in *A Perfect Day* is hand-drawn with gorgeous pastel paints.

BELOW: *A Gay's Life* is a touching game about the struggle for self-acceptance.

kinds of games are all free-to-play, but we wanted to do something new. After we started, I found a term called 'indie games' from the internet and I thought, okay, we might be indie games."

Bao was years ahead of the curve. In 2015, Steam added support for Chinese payment options like Alipay, exposing a few million Chinese gamers to a massive, unregulated market of games, many of which were independently made. Steam's Chinese audience doubled in just a year. And when *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* became a phenomenon in 2017, it doubled again.

There are now an estimated 30 million Chinese users on Steam, making China one of Steam's largest demographics.

But Steam's surprising popularity is just a drop in the bucket



CHANGING TIMES *A short history of gaming in China*

1990

Tariffs on importing Japanese consoles lead to an enormous market of pirated videogames.

2002

PC gaming flourishes in China, with internet cafes growing from 40,000 to 110,000.

2007

Social browser games explode in China, paving the way for the mobile game boom.

2013

In five years, China's games industry grows around 1,000 per cent.

2015

Ban on consoles lifted, but consoles struggle to catch on anyway.

2019

New game licensing process restarts, with new restrictions.

2000

Citing health concerns, arcades and consoles are banned in China.

2004

Adapting to the market, Chinese game developers invent free-to-play games.

2009

Ban on arcade games is lifted.

2014

Mobile gaming gets big and China surpasses the US in total games revenue.

2018

Massive government reforms put a freeze on all game licensing for nine months.



YOU WON'T FIND MANY BIG RPGS LIKE THE WITCHER 3 OR SINGLE PLAYER SHOOTERS LIKE CONTROL BEING MADE IN CHINA

compared to China's gargantuan PC gaming industry, which pulled in \$15.2 billion in 2018 – over half of what the United States' entire games industry, including console and mobile games, made in that same period. Despite its size, though, China's PC gaming scene, like in much of Southeast Asia, is largely dominated by free-to-play MMOs and clones of popular western games. *Crossfire*, for example, is a *Counter-Strike* clone by Korean developer Smilegate that boasts an astonishing 660 million players, most from China, and has grossed an estimated \$10.6 billion as of 2018. You won't find many big RPGs like *The Witcher 3* or single player shooters like *Control* being made in China.

That online, free-to-play games became the standard in China is largely due to a 15-year ban on gaming consoles in June of 2000 and the prohibitive cost of playing PC games at the time.

For many Chinese PC gamers, piracy or internet cafes were the only option. To adapt, Chinese game developers started treating their games as a service, making them free to play but monetising in-game activities to recoup their costs.

That, in turn, inspired the prevailing belief that Chinese gamers were only interested in grindy, free-to-play MMOs.

GOING INDIE

Over the past decade, people like Wesley Bao began to challenge that belief. Noting the surprising success of a few experimental art games on China's Apple store, and exposed to international game communities through events like the Game Developers Conference, Bao was inspired by indie games exploding into the mainstream and wanted to foster a similar renaissance in China. "There was no community here," Bao explains. "So we had to make one. At the end of 2011, we started the first game jam in China."

Bao tells me as we sit just outside the main convention hall, "Our vision is to make games that are impactful. We think games are not only entertainment, they should be like movies or music. They can be art, and they can have a cultural impact on society." Just a few dozen feet from us, Coconut Island Games' booth is a testament to that vision. It's styled like a Chinese classroom, complete wooden desks where laptops and even an old CRT television entice attendees with demos of Coconut Island's latest games.

"We have a lot of opinions about society – a lot of things that we have a different opinion about, and we want to express ourselves."

That yearning for emotional expression and cultural commentary is what made Coconut Island's partnership with the developers of *Chinese Parents* a perfect fit. Developed by Moyuwan Games, a team of just three



A few kilometres away from the expo is a cute park where families rent river boats.



CHINESE PARENTS QUICKLY SURGED TO THE TOP OF STEAM'S GLOBAL TOP SELLERS LIST

The expo only takes up the first floor of this massive convention centre.



» people, *Chinese Parents* is an insightful, often touching, and frequently hilarious look into the stresses of growing up in modern China. It released on Steam in September 2018 and quickly surged to the top of Steam's global top sellers list, proving Bao's belief that Chinese gamers weren't only interested in free-to-play MMOs. Though the game was only available in Simplified Chinese, it sold well over a million copies – half of which came from Steam.

Chinese Parents isn't the only game to defy the stereotype. In a Starbucks just behind the convention centre, I squeeze into a corner with a few of the developers of *The Scroll of Taiwu*. Like *Chinese Parents*, *The Scroll of Taiwu* launched on Steam in September 2018 and soon became a global top seller. "We almost lost our minds,"

Adam, *The Scroll of Taiwu*'s art director, tells me. "We were totally crazy about it."

Similar to *Chinese Parents*, *The Scroll of Taiwu* was made by just a handful of people, though it was originally a passion project of a solo developer named Jay. Adam and another developer, who goes by the nickname Dinosaur, joined the team later along with another programmer who quickly quit because the game was "too complicated" to make. And, believe me, *The Scroll of Taiwu* is complicated. Mixing different elements from roguelikes and business sims, it's an intricately simulated sandbox RPG about rebuilding a family dynasty inspired by wuxia – a genre of Chinese fiction





LEFT: In *Chinese Parents*, you can become anything from an author to an indie game dev.

ABOVE: *LoveChoice* is a serene game about the power of relationships.

focused on larger-than-life warriors and martial artists.

With no programmer, Adam says that Jay had to learn how to code on his own. For three years, he worked his construction job from early morning until noon and then would stay up until 3.00am working on *The Scroll of Taiwu*. During that time, Adam also gambled everything and quit his job to work on the project full-time. What kept them going was a conviction that “people were wanting a new game, a different game,” Adam says. “Not only with an interesting and beautiful story but also complicated game mechanics only for hardcore players – not for casual players.” *The Scroll of Taiwu* provided exactly that. “We reached 300,000 copies sold in the first week,” Adam continues. “Now the total is over 2 million, and we still sell around 2,000 copies every day. It feels unbelievable. Ninety percent of the people who own our game are from China.”

STRIKING GOLD

It's easy to focus on the success stories like *The Scroll of Taiwu* and *Chinese Parents*, but the cruel reality is that most Chinese indie developers – just like indie developers anywhere – will fail to ever make a financially successful game. But that isn't for lack of passion or talent.

Nestled in the back corner of WePlay, a scattering of indie developers stand next to demo stations for their games, hoping the brief glimpses of colourful action might draw in passing attendees.

One game has gathered a small crowd of bystanders spectating a tense duel between a player and a giant monkey demon. Called *Eastern Exorcist*, this action-RPG sees you travelling through eerie, hand-painted villages and forests fighting ancient Chinese demons and spirits. Though the combat obviously borrows from *Sekiro*, I was intrigued by one roughly translated cutscene where the main character saves a captured fox spirit from a group of his fellow demon slayers.

A few feet over is a game called *Self*, a ‘Kafka-esque’ surrealist text adventure about a boy trying to find his missing father despite no one else realising he's gone. The

little I played was fascinatingly bizarre, making surprising use of its economical 4-bit graphics to build the same tension brought on by an emergency television broadcast.

Though it wasn't at the show, *A Gay's Life* is an introspective journey that explores the social stigma that surrounds homosexuality in China. Partly an autobiography, the story forces you to navigate tough social situations, choosing between being true to yourself or caving to societal and familial pressures.

All of this is summarised by a self-acceptance score that represents how you've internalised your own sexual orientation while also responding to the perceptions of those around you. The multiple endings, I'm told, can range pretty wildly from successfully coming out to your family to being coerced into shock conversion therapy.

Another game, *Rhythm Fighter*, is a fusion between arcade beat-'em-up *One Finger Death Punch* and rhythm roguelike *Crypt of the Necrodancer* – except you're fighting mutant vegetables. Levels are randomly generated and there are loads of skills and items to find, but what I love most is the cartoony aesthetic and adorable main characters – one is a dog dressed like Snake from *Metal Gear Solid*.

But as I'm walking from booth to booth, trying out many new games and talking with their developers, their enthusiasm is unfortunately underscored by a troubling uncertainty about the future.

THE STEAM LOOPHOLE

China's enormous videogame industry is beginning to stagnate, according to many of the developers I've spoken to. Part of that reason is simply due to over-saturation of similar games, but it also has a lot to do with the Chinese government's increasingly heavy-handed regulations and censorship.

For decades, the Chinese government has enforced strict censorship of all media and information. A pervasive firewall blocks access to Google, Facebook, Twitch and hundreds of other websites. But interestingly enough, Steam is not one of them. Despite its enormous market of unregulated games, Steam is easily accessed in China. For China's indie developers, Steam is an invaluable loophole in a bureaucratic system that would otherwise destroy them.

To legally publish a game in China, developers must first obtain the proper licence. This requires submitting your game to be reviewed by the State Administration of Press and Publication (SAPP) which examines games to ensure they abide by China's strict rules. This includes everything from having no blood and gore, sexual content, or themes that run counter to China's state-sanctioned values. Looking around at the various indie games at WePlay, I quickly lose count of the games that break one of these rules.

“We want to make good games and we want freedom of expression,

ONLY IN CHINA

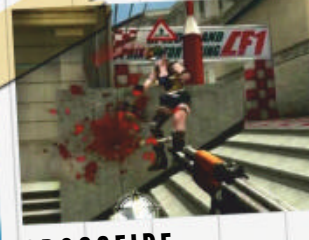
Most popular PC games not available in the West



FANTASY WESTWARD JOURNEY

Release: 2001
Total players: 310 million as of 2015

This is the big daddy of all Chinese MMOs. *Fantasy Westward Journey* and its spin-offs are among the most successful games of all time. Deeply rooted in Chinese mythology (particularly the literary classic *Journey to the West*), you can do everything from fight demons, run shops, or have and raise children.



CROSSFIRE

Release: 2007
Total players: 660 million as of 2018

This free-to-play *Counter-Strike* clone is far more successful than its inspiration, grossing over \$12 billion as of 2019. That's more than the entire *Warcraft* and *Final Fantasy* series. Part of that is thanks to the microtransactions that monetise everything from guns to character skins, but *Crossfire* also has dozens of more casual-friendly game modes too.



HAPPY FARM

Release: 2008
Total players: 25 million a day

Ironically, Facebook-hit *Farmville* was actually a rip off of this browser game that took China by storm a decade ago. Though similar, *Happy Farm* had a big emphasis on PvP where dastardly players could steal one another's crops. It was so popular that Tencent, the publisher, had to limit new accounts registrations to just 2 million per day.

Against All Odds

we just have to be careful to stay within the rules,” says one developer. Everyone I spoke to about the government regulations requested to remain anonymous.

“It’s very cheap to submit a game for licensing, but it takes a long time and that’s what’s expensive,” another developer tells me. I’m told the licensing process can take up to six months, but no one knows for sure. The system operates like a queue and last year many games had to wait much longer than normal while censors churned through an enormous backlog due to massive reforms that saw China’s licensing process put on hold for nine months. A big company might see that as the cost of doing business, but for China’s independent developers who are often scraping by to finish their games, waiting months to get a licence could mean financial ruin.

That’s why Steam has become an invaluable lifeline for China’s small indie community. “I would say 100 per cent of China’s indie scene is alive because of Steam,” says Zifei Wu, president of *My Time at Portia* developer Pathea Games.

“If Steam wasn’t available, we wouldn’t be doing this,” says another developer. “I think that’s probably the case for most developers in China.”

“Steam is 100 per cent the most important thing for our survival,” says a different dev. “Two years ago, I wasn’t in the industry, and Steam is the only reason I can survive.”

Thanks to Steam, any Chinese developer can sidestep the approvals process and launch their game right away. And even though Steam’s 30 million Chinese users is tiny compared to its overall gaming population, it’s more than enough to sustain China’s indie developers. But, like the government’s constantly shifting regulations, that can change at a moment’s notice.

UNCERTAIN FUTURES

This year, Valve and its Chinese business partner Perfect World have

plans to launch a version of Steam that’s just for China. One promised benefit is local servers that will guarantee a more stable multiplayer experience, but the downside is that Steam China will only sell games that are licensed by the government.

The big question is what happens to Steam’s current ‘global’ version when Steam China launches later this year. Is Steam China going to replace Steam? In an interview with Eurogamer, Valve’s DJ Powers said it was Valve’s “goal” to make sure that players didn’t lose access to their library, saves, or other data. He also said that “nothing’ll change about Steam global” but none of the developers I spoke to regarding Steam China take solace from those vague remarks.

“Steam China is terrifying,” an anonymous developer tells me. “It’s horrible. I’m not sure what it will be, but I hope players can still access international Steam.”

The problem, I’m told, lies largely in how China’s firewall works. It’s no secret that VPNs can be used to slip through Chinese censorship and



Coconut Island's booth is styled like a Chinese classroom.



TOP RIGHT: *The Scroll of Taiwu* was huge, unexpected success on Steam.

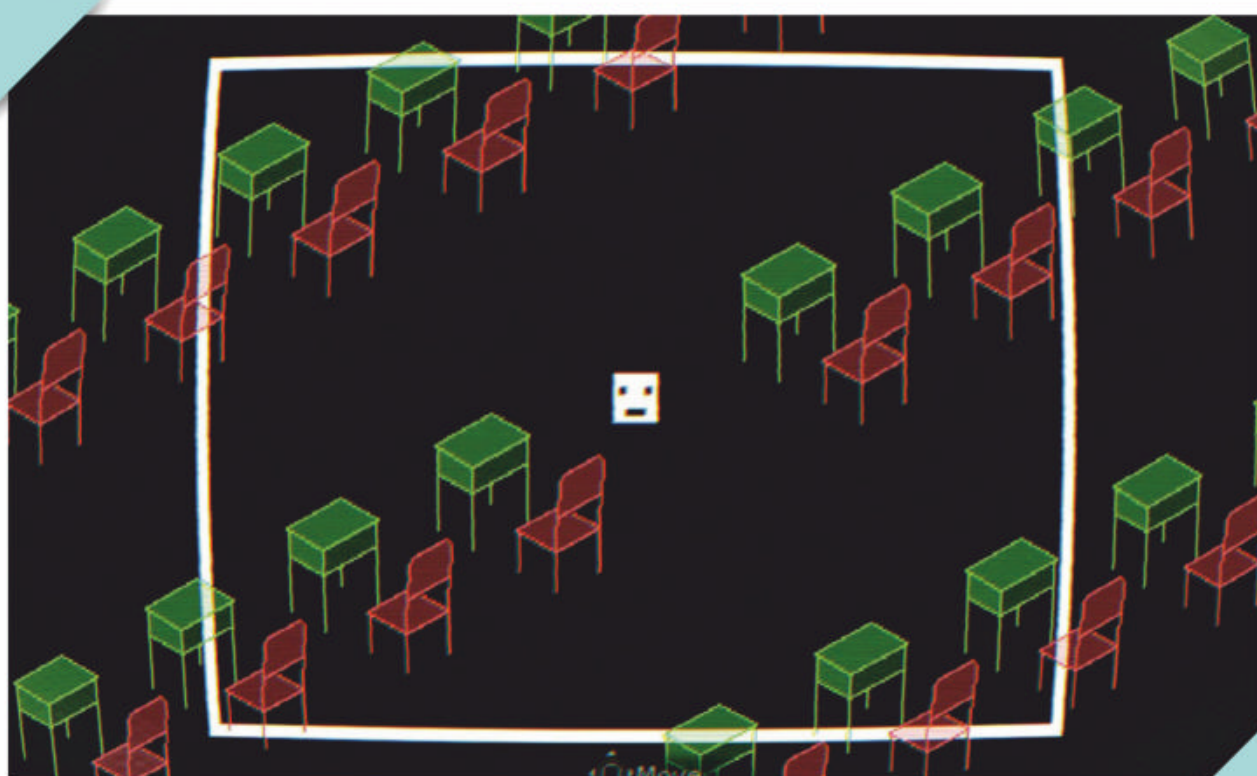
BELOW: Abstract and weird, *Self* is an unsettling and surreal text adventure.

access restricted websites, but that method isn’t consistent. During my time in Shanghai, my ability to access websites like Google using a VPN was never a guarantee. Sometimes it would work, often it wouldn’t.

Naturally, China’s government won’t explain how its firewall works. The power, I’m told, comes from keeping its citizens in the dark. The endless rumours and speculation create a kind of white noise that makes it impossible to know for sure what’s going on or, more crucially, what could happen next.

Multiple sources say access to encrypted connections fluctuates with China’s political climate. During times of political unrest, like the Hong Kong riots, VPN connections won’t work for many Chinese citizens. Then, over time, they’ll mysteriously start to work again. It’s a fascinating ebb and flow driven by the unique dichotomy of China’s authoritarian government and capitalist private business sector.

“The reality is that the government has the ability to fully shut down access to the outside internet but chooses not to because it would impede business and hinder China’s economy too much,” one developer says. “Whether it likes it or not, Chinese businesses need some measure of access to the outside





NO ONE KNOWS WHAT'S NEXT, BUT WORST-CASE SCENARIOS LOOM JUST AHEAD

world in order to make money. But the goal is to add as much friction to the process as possible to make it a huge headache for the average user, to deter them from using VPNs.”

If Steam is blocked, it would technically still be accessible via a VPN. But that constant friction would likely force many of its 30 million users to play games elsewhere, and present major problems for

developers. It's easy to imagine the damage of having a critical patch delayed by unreliable access to Steam, or to not even receive the feedback you need to make that patch in the first place.

Coupled with strict government regulations and the general feeling that its videogame industry is beginning to stagnate, China's indie developers are in a tough spot. No one knows what's next, but worst-case scenarios loom just ahead. What's clear, one developer tells me, is that Chinese indie games cannot

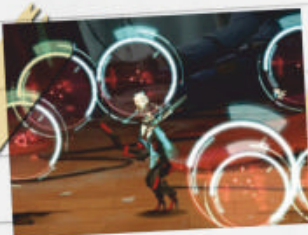
rely on their turbulent domestic industry. If they're to survive, they have to go global. Considering how Japanese, European, and North American culture has influenced games, I'm excited that one day we might have more RPGs that explore Chinese mythology or games that, like *Chinese Parents*, give insight into fascinating pockets of everyday life in China.

As uncertain as the future might be for these games, Steam is still the best path forward. But that also means the people who make them will have to continue living with the unease of knowing their means of survival could disappear at any moment. I ask Wesley Bao why he persists in the face of all this censorship, bureaucracy, and adversity. “We love games,” Bao says, smiling. “We don't really have any other choice. To make games is our life.” ■



RELEASE VALVE

The best Chinese indie games you can buy on Steam



ICEY

Link: bit.ly/386oDCw
Steam review score: 91%

A frenetic 2D hack 'n' slash game with an unreliable narrator similar to *The Stanley Parable*.



MY TIME AT PORTIA

Link: bit.ly/2Rf4e7E
Steam review score: 91%

It's a charming and beautiful *Harvest Moon*-esque action-RPG, what more could you want?



LOST CASTLE

Link: bit.ly/2QSxdiz
Steam review score: 90%

A brutally punishing 4-player co-op roguelike inspired by *Dark Souls* but with hand-drawn art.



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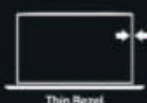


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GOT REAL



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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Dry spell

As a keen PC enthusiast, you've probably noticed that, like crops, the weather, or the migration of birds, game releases follow seasons. Some periods, such as 'Pre-Christmas' (November to early December) we are swamped with titles, and scramble to find adequate space in these pages for the glut of juicy games. Other times... not so much. Here towards the start of the year, we find ourselves in the dry season, made all the drier by a slew of high-profile delays. We have had to do much seeking and searching to scrape together a sufficient harvest for you this issue. But out of scarcity comes opportunity. These lean months are a great time to shine a spotlight on the indie and unusual, the b-tier and the bizarre – games that might have struggled to make their voices heard during the times of bounty. Over the page, a selection of these overlooked fruits await.

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MANAGING EDITOR

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LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's shambling, groaning reviewers...



ALEX SPENCER
Specialist in
Poppin' domes
Currently playing
Zombie Army 4
This month
Thought about Jaffa Cakes a lot, which will become obvious as you read on.



ROBERT ZAK
Specialist in
Compulsory emotions
Currently playing
Paranoia: Happiness is Mandatory
This month
Declared all our other reviewers traitors to Friend PC Gamer.



RACHEL WATTS
Specialist in
Adorable objects
Currently playing
Wattam
This month
Made friends with a toilet and a spoon. The buddy system working as intended.



MALINDY HETFELD
Specialist in
Android rights
Currently playing
Detroit: Become Human
This month
Gave David Cage more of her precious time.



SAM GREER
Specialist in
Dinosaur combat
Currently playing
Monster Hunter World: Iceborne
This month
Ate food prepared by a cat. It's a health and safety nightmare.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Bird photography
Currently playing
Toripon
This month
Discovered the joys of single-player social media. Honestly, it sounds better.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Dark age puns
Currently playing
Total War Saga: Thrones of Britannia
This month
Discovered new eras to be delightfully English in.

WAKE THE DEAD

ZOMBIE ARMY 4: DEAD WAR does exactly what it says on the tin. *By Alex Spencer*

What's your eighth favourite snack? You know, that one you'd never actively buy unless it was on offer but, when left alone with a packet, you'll eat until your fingers reach for the next and find only crumbs. Now, imagine your cupboards are filled with it – that's what playing *Zombie Army 4: Dead War* feels like. Especially if the snack in question happens to be delicious braaaains.

In this analogy, the feeling you get as you chomp down – that beautiful weightless moment before the regret and mild tummy ache and the memory that you have a family history of diabetes – is clicking the left mouse button to fire your weapon and hearing the satisfying squish of another zombie's cranium exploding. As gaming pleasures go, it's not quite on a par with the solution to a fiendish puzzle clicking into place somewhere in the bottom of your brain or the explosion of possibility that comes from trying something stupid and getting a response that shows the developers saw you coming. But it is certainly exceedingly moreish.

Over the 15 years and six games that have led to this point, starting

with 2005's *Sniper Elite*, Rebellion has honed this one moment to its sharpest possible point. The kickback on a submachine gun weapon, each shot punching your reticule higher and closer to that all-important

headshot, has all the mass-produced genius of a Jaffa Cake's sponge base. The way zombies tumble quivering to the ground when you hit them with an electrified bullet, delicious as just-slightly-dark chocolate.

There's nothing wrong with a few empty calories now and then

And pushing in with your sniper scope, framing a distant face in intimate close-up, then watching as your round whizzes in slow-motion from the chamber, out across the level and then into their eye socket, through the squishy mass of brain, and out the far side of their skull? You'd better believe that's the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Four humans, infinite zombies, hours and hours of well-made shootybangs

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Rebellion Developments

PUBLISHER
Rebellion Developments

REVIEWED ON
Radeon RX 580, AMD Ryzen 5 2600 3.9GHz, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
zombiearmy.com

ambiguous gelatinous orange filling – the dirty little thrill that is, as much as you'd be ashamed to admit it, what you're here for in the first place.

There's nothing wrong with a few empty calories now and then. But then you look back to the metaphorical cupboard, and realise... it's still full. There are another couple of hundred zombies between you and the level exit, and beyond that nine chapters' worth of campaign, each of them a few hours long. Then a horde mode, the weekly challenges that add fresh modifiers to familiar levels. And, the big innovation for this latest instalment, a hundred levels of character perks, weapon upgrades and unlockable cosmetics to chew your way through.

FLESHED OUT

It'd be churlish to say there's too much of *Dead War* – Rebellion has clearly built this game to last, keeping in mind those players who crave endless undead to pour bullets into, making sure they're fed until the next one comes shambling along. And it never gets boring, exactly. The game does a great job of switching things up: in one chapter, you go from a boat ride through Venice to defending a base from zombies that drop from the sky, sans parachute, and finally all-out war in a waterlogged arena where you can feed enemies (or, as I learned, friends) to an undead shark.

Let's linger on that shark for a moment, because why the hell wouldn't you? It's one of the many traps that litter every level, alongside your common-or-garden explosive barrels and precariously dangling weights that can be shot loose to squish any zombies below. In co-op, they're one of the few things that cause friendly-fire damage – and not only that, they tend to be insta-kills, with no chance for a revival. I'm not saying exactly how I found this out but suffice to say that if you ever want to end a decade-long friendship, try sucking said friend into the spinning blade of a turbine, turning



COLLECTOMANIA *Tat you can find in Dead War*



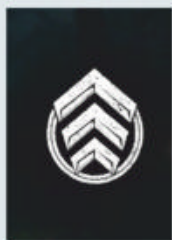
COMICS
Sadly just the covers, but these are spot-on homages to classic war comics. Which makes sense, given Rebellion owns 2000AD.



NOTES
Writing is not this game's strong suit, so these diary entries and missives are there to be ticked off rather than read.



HANDS
Like The Addams Family's Thing, a no-longer-appended appendage with a life of its own. Often hidden up in the rafters.



UPGRADE KIT
This is what you're really here for. Grab one of these and you can add a bigger magazine or bullets that explode.



HEROIC ACTION
You have to wonder how survivors feel about their lives being ranked alongside a letter as a collectible.

Kill-cams are a good way of boning up on human anatomy.



One single zombie. A very rare sight in *Dead War*.



You know, for shooting their teeth off.



Just when you thought it was safe to leap over the zombie-shark-infested water.



Luckily, there's a robust photo mode (which I spent about half my playtime in).

Zombie shark? Eye of Sauron tower?
Must be a WWII setting.



Multiplayer comes with all
the emotes you'd expect.



Guns can be customised all the
way down to their scope design.



These Black Lagoon monstrosities spit
zombie musk all over you.



Ragdoll physics + slo-mo
X-Rays = frequent brilliance.



» their carefully customised character into mincemeat.

Traps are one of the many ways *Dead War* switches up the rhythm of its violence. The kill-cams, with their cutaways to the inner workings of your latest victim, help punctuate the action, but more important are the various special attacks that charge up as you play. There's a powerful melee attack on a constant cooldown timer, replacing your usual ineffective shove with a machete slash or Thor-style hammer strike. Getting ten kills with a particular weapon will activate its special ability, which might be slowing down time or handing you a few guaranteed headshots. And if you manage to chain ten kills together in a combo, you can pull off a Takedown, a gruesome one-hit melee kill that rewards you with some health, similar to *Doom*'s glory kills.

The threats you're dealing with vary too. As well as your rank-and-file shamblers, there are commanders who can resurrect their underlings, nimble roof-hopping snipers, and those guys who run towards you screaming then explode, having apparently sprinted all the way here from *Serious Sam*. There's even a literal meat wagon to contend with – half-track APCs with gooey pink flesh between its armour plates and a hatch that opens to reveal some unnervingly human innards. These foes mean your reticle has to frequently wander away from standard head height, because weak points can vary from explosive hearts to back-mounted fuel tanks.

NUMBERS GAME

Ultimately, though, the game is made up of small variations on that same snack-size experience, repeated over and over again. A limited-edition lemon-and-lime Jaffa Cake is still, at the end of the day, another Jaffa Cake. And you start to suspect *Dead War* knows it, because it's constantly trying to distract you with the glint of something shiny. Which, most of the time, means a number getting gradually bigger and bigger.

Every kill has a point value; pull off a few in quick succession and the game will apply a combo multiplier to your score. (In multiplayer, this quickly overwhelms the rest of the game. It's possible for one player to get exponentially ahead of the others, which can quickly turn co-op into something more competitive. I'm not saying that I intentionally sucked my

HUMAN(ISH) TARGET

A guide to shooting zombie where it hurts

1 HEAD

You know the drill by now: remove the head or destroy the brain. Then watch in slow motion as it all collapses into splinters of bone and red mush.

2 HEART

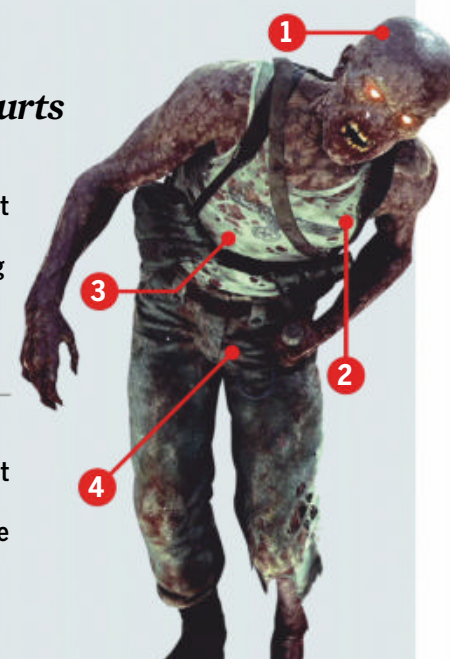
Shot through the heart and you're to blame. For some enemy types, hitting the old ticker is the only way to stop them from rising again.

3 OTHER ORGANS

Look, I'm not a doctor. All I know is these zombies are filled with what – based on the results of blowing them up – are still vital organs.

4 TESTICLES

A shot to the nads isn't especially effective, tactically speaking, but the game will commend you for having the, ahem, balls to go for it.



friend into that rotor engine, but... does anyone know a good lawyer?)

At the end of each section, your point total is converted into XP. There are ways to earn bonuses, like finding collectibles and completing section-specific challenges that ask you to kill a few dozen enemies with fire or feed them to a shark or land headshots while your boat is in motion. From there, XP pushes you up through levels, which open up your abilities back in the game and make it easier to rack up high scores.

It's an airtight loop, one that is perfectly compelling when you're inside of it – but it's worth remembering that something being airtight doesn't just mean oxygen can't escape. It also means fresh air can't get in.

Stepping back from an hours' long session of *Dead War* can get a bit existential. At time of writing, I've murdered a small town's worth of zombies. One night, in the midst of it all, I lay awake in the dark with my brain still busily sorting through the act of lining up a shot and pulling the trigger, like a much gorier version of the *Tetris Effect*. Thank God I'm thoroughly desensitised. It's not the violence that disturbs me, but the feeling that I could see the game laid out flat, a conveyor belt of slow-motion headshots stretching out into infinity in front and behind of me.

This feeling pretty much goes away when you're playing with others, the same way it feels better to split a bottle of wine or have multiple hungry fingers all pulling at the foil of

the same crisp packet, exposing its delicious innards to the group. I'm not even sure *Dead War* is a better game with more players – the impact of each person's actions quickly gets lost in the chaos, so you rarely know which shot caused that zombie's head to implode – but it makes for a good accompaniment to chatting the same kind of nonsense you normally would around a sticky table top in a pub. Feel free to mentally add a couple of points onto the score for every mate you reckon can be won

over with an Evil Dead-style, "Join us".

And, of course, even playing on your own, you could make *Dead War* part of a healthy nutritious diet. Much like that packet of biscuits or crisps or whatever snack food

you've been imagining this whole time, you don't actually need to eat the whole thing at once. You could enjoy a sensible amount of its beautifully realised high-definition ultraviolence, put it down, come back later, have a few more nibbles. But you won't, will you? You'll always have another until you feel bloated and dizzy and a bit sick. And fair play. January's over now, which means we all can shed the pretence of our New Year's resolutions and give in to the hungry zombie within. ■

There's even
a literal
meat wagon
to contend
with

PC GAMER VERDICT

An excellently-crafted shooter, especially with friends. Just don't expect much in the way of brains.

70

GIRL FROM MARS

SUPER CRUSH KO is a one-hit wonder. *By Alex Spencer*

It's a tale as old as time: girl meets alien warlord. Alien warlord comes crashing through her bedroom wall, steals her cat and maybe her heart. Girl grabs a laser rifle and heads out to get her cat back. Functionally, as a setup for a videogame, this mightn't be all that different to 'your princess is in another castle', but paired with a bright art style that looks like it's been scrawled onto your monitor in pastels, it's exactly the kind of thing that makes me do the heart eyes.

So, yeah, it was pretty much love at first sight with *Super Crush KO*, which reminded me of Steven Universe and Scott Pilgrim and *Sayonara Wild Hearts*. But this is all surface-level attraction, based on appearance and

assumption – the kind that quickly fades. Sorry to say, this isn't going to be a love story.

Peel back the impeccable presentation and underneath you'll find a straightforward 2D brawler. Armed with the laser gun and a selection of punches, kicks and dashes, you move left to right, clearing screen after screen of robotic nasties. But *Super Crush KO*'s action lacks zest. As gorgeous as the art is, in motion it's never quite as smooth as you'd hope. Your character feels a little like one of those paper dolls you made as a kid, putting pins in the joints so you could jiggle its limbs.

It's not exactly the kind of combat you'd hold up next to a *Devil May Cry* but, like those games, *Super Crush KO* is constantly marking your

performance, with a UI-dominating letter grade sat at the top of the screen. And this is the aspect of the game I'm most torn about.

On one hand, it's the engine that powers *Super Crush KO*. It's seemingly possible to stitch entire levels into a single elongated combo, taking advantage of the special moves that send your character dashing forwards and the range of your laser rifle to ensure there's never a

moment of dead air. The challenge here isn't so much beating the aliens as it is maintaining a keepy-uppy of hits and dodges, lest your 'A' grade be replaced with a dreaded 'D'.

On the other, I'm not sure how well this actually fits with every other part of the game. Some of this, admittedly, might be personal bias – I'm the one who gives out scores around here, thank you very much – but the constant reminder of your current grade means that every moment you're not landing a punch feels like a failure.

Every moment you're not landing a punch feels like a failure

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cute beat-'em-up with enough visual flair to land a series order from Cartoon Network

EXPECT TO PAY
£11.39

DEVELOPER
Vertex Pop

PUBLISHER
Vertex Pop

REVIEWED ON
Radeon RX 580, AMD Ryzen 5 2600 3.9GHz, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
vertexpop.com/supercrushko

It's not that a bright colourful exterior can't conceal sharp teeth (just look at *Cuphead*) but more that its simple combat system never earns the inevitable knot of stress in the pit of my stomach that accompanies a ticking combo timer.

UNENGAGED

Honestly, you don't need to engage your brain much when playing. I quickly found myself reaching for headphones (the music, unfortunately, never rises above the 'serviceable' level) and the game just became a way to keep my hands and eyes busy while I fixed my attention on a podcast. And after a while, even my eyes stopped registering *Super Crush KO*'s ample charm.

See, when it comes to visual style, we're fickle little magpies, always hungry for something novel. Even the prettiest game, if it never grows or changes, our brains can get very good at looking past it straight to the underlying systems – and at that point, it might as well be all stickmen and grey boxes. Take *Sayonara Wild Hearts*, one of the games I thought of in that first flutter of infatuation. It's got a remarkable aesthetic, but it flings a new idea at you every few seconds. In *Super Crush KO*, once you've unlocked all your moves – which occurs around the end of the second level – you're doing and seeing pretty much the same stuff until the credits roll.

And so eyes inevitably wander, seeking a pretty new thing to crush on instead. Look, I'm not proud of it, but I'm already eyeing up this hot indie game that's just wandered into my Steam recommendations, with style up to here and aesthetics for hours. This time, I'm sure, it's got to be true love. ■

TOP CAT *Chubbz is the star, but how does he compare to other gaming pets?*



CHUBBZ
An excellent argument for nominative determinism, Chubbz is more loaf than cat. Not very loyal but what were you expecting?



PALICO
Monster Hunter World's Palicoes are unlike real cats in two ways: they're helpful and they don't mind being dressed up.



BOOMER
Bad game, good dog. Boomer is the best of *Far Cry 5*'s companion NPCs, even counting the other two Fangs for Hire.

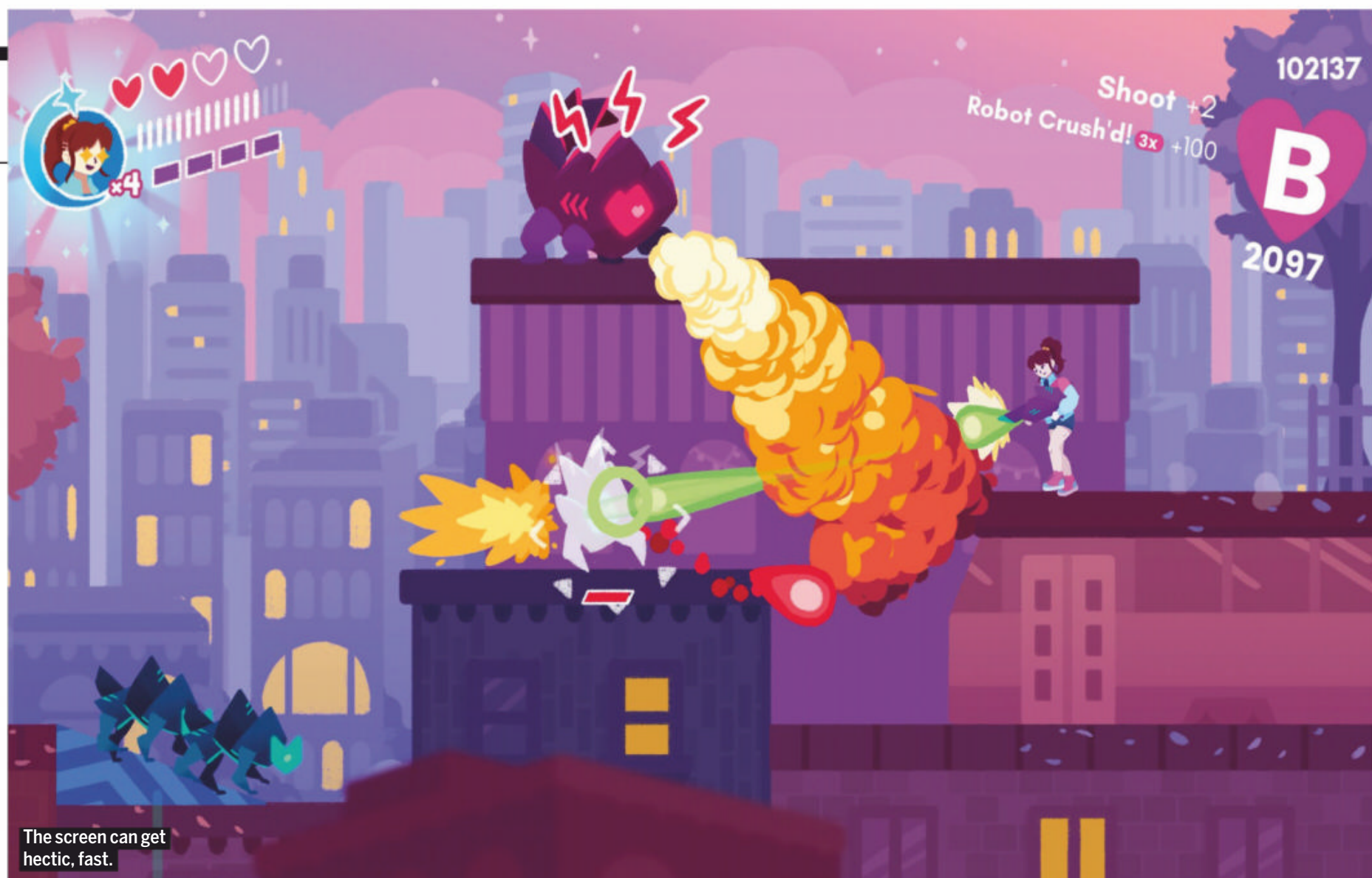


THE GOOSE
This anarchist is nobody's pet. You've seen what it did to that village, why would you want it in your house? Still cute though.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Floaty combat and repetition means cartoon brawler *Super Crush KO* is never more than a pretty face.

53



The screen can get hectic, fast.



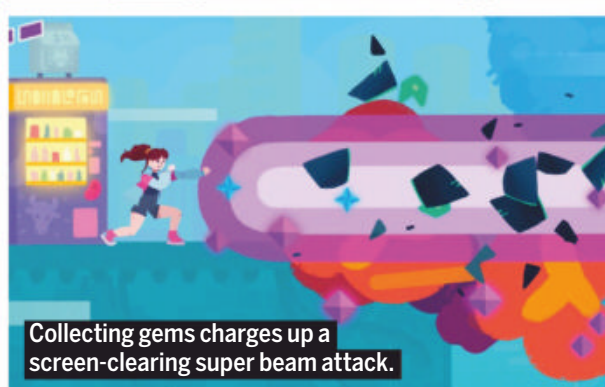
Your character, Karen, finishes each level with an endearing little air-punch.



A well-timed dodge can gobble up incoming bullets.



The comic-style cutscenes are a visual treat.



Collecting gems charges up a screen-clearing super beam attack.



BEYOND THE PALE

Beneath **THE WHITE DOOR**'s simple lines lies a different reality. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

An absence of colour can be wielded in media with all sorts of intentions, but the most profound effect monochrome has is to make you notice what isn't there. There's an implication that something's thematically missing when you watch a world in black and white, so we tend to look at monochrome game worlds as a stylistic shorthand for grief, loss, depression, and other such subject matter that can really mess up your Sunday.

That's certainly true of Rusty Lake's *The White Door*, but in this point-and-click-meets ayahuasca journey you're asking the question literally, not just figuratively: what's missing? Small changes to the daily routine imposed by the white coats behind the white door; an empty white plate instead of the meals you're used to receiving at exactly 5.00pm – these feel like major narrative revelations in the minimalist confines of your cell.

You are Robert Hill and the year is 1972. You know this because it's written on the calendar on your wall and the driving licence in your drawer. Otherwise, the wheres and whys of your life, most pertinently how you ended up in a mental health facility, elude both character and player. What follows is a few days of mundane hour-by-hour routine laid out by unseen people who – you hope – are caring for you.

It's a classic bout of testing the player's obedience

It's a classic bout of testing the player's obedience, pushing you further and further with prosaic tasks like brushing your teeth, at the same time, every single morning, until you start to question things, pick at the

corners of that simple white box you're confined within, and uncover something more complex.

While you poke about at the bits between the game, Robert too goes somewhere else

between his monotonous days, escaping in his dreams. Here a story starts to form of how he might have ended up behind the eponymous door and why he looks so glum in the mirror every day.

Mechanically it's always light-touch. You might be dragging a coffee cup up to Robert's lips as he narrates that he took another sip of coffee in a dream sequence, or answering multiple choice questions during your daily psychological examination.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A minimalist puzzley adventure about mental health

EXPECT TO PAY

£2.89

DEVELOPER

Rusty Lake

PUBLISHER

Second Maze

REVIEWED ON

i7 9700K, RTX 2080 Ti, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

rustylake.com/adventure-games/the-white-door.html

As it progresses it becomes something more like a traditional puzzle game, employing pattern recognition and logic challenges to gate progression, but *The White Door*'s woozy, reality-bending tone means you're never sure of the rules.

Sometimes that's a good thing. It means you don't question why doing X produces outcome Y but just lose yourself to the flow of the journey.

MUDDLED MEMORIES

Games concerning themselves with mental health issues are increasingly common, and this one doesn't have much subtlety about it by comparison to its peers. Darkness and colour. Muddled memories. Sinister psych wards – all the classics are here, and its opaque storytelling style is a trope too. Despite all that I found the subject matter much more challenging than the puzzles. *The White Door* is a game about feeling as bad as it's possible to feel, and with just a few brushstrokes and some voice acting it's unpleasantly effective in putting you in that mental space. It is also a game about feeling better, and enduring life's colour-drained, joyless passages, emerging from the other side, and finding beauty in the smallest, simplest things. All of us can find personal relevance and significance in that, and I suppose that's the power *The White Door* has.

In two hours, using art assets that while well-drawn wouldn't look out of place on Newgrounds for their minimalism and resource economy, *The White Door* gets under your skin and makes you feel what it's like to be somebody else. And it does this not with its exposition sequences or puzzles, but by making you live Robert Hill's tightly scheduled life, toilet trips and all. ■

DRAGGING THE LAKE

More games from Rusty Lake's universe



CUBE ESCAPE: PARADOX

Among many games all set in the same Rusty Lake world, this room escape game melds live action and Poirot-tinged flash game.



RUSTY LAKE PARADISE

Remember that VHS from The Ring? This is what it would look like if it was an early Newgrounds game. All the creepier for it, too.



RUSTY LAKE HOTEL

Another slice of sheer surrealism and slow-burn horror, under the masquerade of a quaint murder mystery. Very sneaky of you, Rusty Lake.

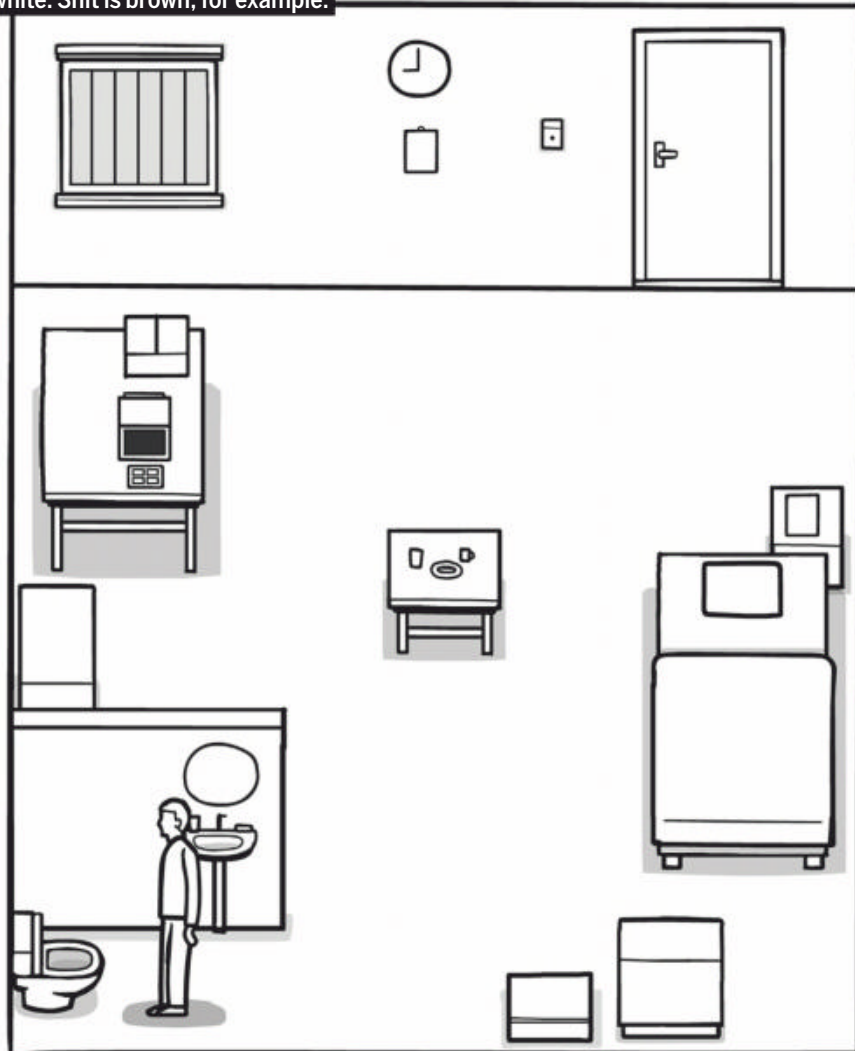
PC GAMER

VERDICT

Obtuse in its puzzles and not that artfully told, *The White Door* is still effective at taking you to another place.

77

Things are not always black and white. Shit is brown, for example.



Johnsson Bird Food, where Robert earned a crust.



These musical notes form one of the game's least inspired puzzles.



No use crying over spilled... strawberry milk?



Compact and bijou, Peter, compact and bijou.

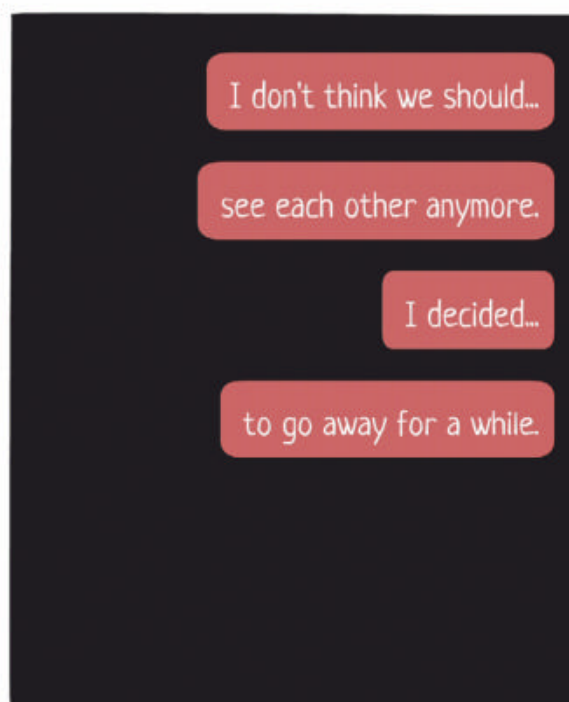


I don't think we should...

see each other anymore.

I decided...

to go away for a while.



EDGE OF TREASON

Subvert or support an underground dystopia in
PARANOIA: HAPPINESS IS MANDATORY. By Robert Zak

The dystopia of enforced happiness has been dissected across media obsessively for decades, pretty much since capitalism and communism emerged as the two opposing ideologies of the 20th century, and did all in their power to show citizens on the other side just how happy we all are.

It's a theme that often plays out as satire, but *Paranoia: Happiness is Mandatory*, based on the tabletop RPG, goes meta by parodying that satire. It's witty and brimming with maddening bureaucracy and obfuscating double-speak that's part Joseph Heller, part Aldous Huxley.

You are a clone, born into adulthood in a futuristic underground society called Alpha Complex. It's a rigidly hierarchical place, run by an all-seeing AI called Friend Computer, and filled with subservient people wearing colour-coded jumpsuits that denote their social standing. One small step out of line, and your treason will begin to accrue.

Treason is all too easy to commit in *Paranoia*, and you'll need to quickly learn how to tow the line lest your treason level reaches 100 per cent and you're summoned for incineration by Friend Computer. Speaking out of turn, asking too many questions, or even giving the wrong answers at a confession booth designed to absolve you of your

transgressions are just a few of the slip-ups you can make.

You're always paranoid, always wondering what petty action will get you in trouble this time. Even your own team members can go crying to the authorities in their hopes of becoming team leader themselves.

It's a system that imbues each dialogue choice with gravitas.

You progress by completing missions for Friend Computer – choosing from a small pool of team members to join you, each with different skills and

personalities, then heading out into different parts of the underground.

True to CRPG tradition, combat is real-time with pause

DETECTIVE WORK

These missions are at their strongest when leaning into detective work. One early mission sees you tracking down a traitor who's been rewiring fizzy pop vending machines to kill people. You need to sneak and schmooze your way onto crime scenes and deduce what happened.

I always have time for a game that lets you play the bastard. Double-crossing double-crossers, or

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A comedic and light CRPG with active-pause tactical combat

EXPECT TO PAY
£27.80

DEVELOPER
Black Shamrock, Cyanide

PUBLISHER
Bigben Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
epicgames.com/store/en-US/product/paranoia/home

executing enemies after smooth-talking some intel from them feels deliciously evil. At these points, *Paranoia* follows the prestigious path of RPG sleuth-athon *Disco Elysium* in showing that a well-written game can be compelling with minimal combat.

True to CRPG tradition, combat is real-time with pause. You can direct squad members to get behind cover, flank enemies, and use some cooldown-based abilities, but beyond the bosses the enemy AI rarely tests you. For the most part, you can pew-pew your way through the game with laser rifles, rockets, and the occasional ability. There's a loot system here too, but the limited range of interesting weaponry and armour along with tight and fiddly inventory space means that it's rarely worth the hassle to go through.

Each team member has their own motives and personality, which can have a profound impact on how your mission pans out. One team member may threaten to derail a mission when trying to settle a score with the member of a secret bot-fighting club, while others may betray you to side with a rebel robot faction.

Take out a teammate and their clones still reappear for the next mission, which somewhat dulls the impact of your decisions, but in the moment they create welcome unexpected scenarios.

Paranoia loves to point to the pointlessness of your actions for comic effect, but in doing so at the expense of compelling mechanics and systems, it tends to feel a little pointless itself, lacking a clear incentive for you to push through the game. It captures the irreverence of its tabletop source material, but skims over too many details needed to make it a great videogame. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A witty and weird RPG hybrid that unfortunately never quite follows through with its more interesting ideas.

64

WHY TREASON?

It's easy to break the laws of Alpha Complex and increase your treason level. Here are some of the stranger treasonous behaviours you need to avoid

TREASON LEVEL: 5
Stepping into an area demarcated for those of higher social standing than you

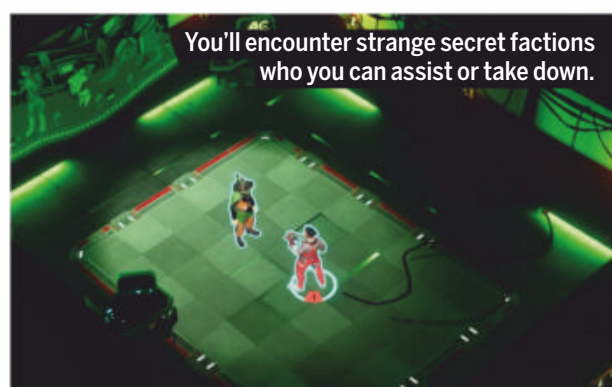
TREASON LEVEL: 10
Initiating conversation with those of higher social standing than you

TREASON LEVEL: 15
Asking questions that attempt to gain information beyond your clearance

TREASON LEVEL: (VARIOUS)
Giving the wrong answers in a confession booth designed to decrease your treason level.



Boss battles are intense but often fiddly affairs due to limited team management.



Combat encounters can look impressive, but lack tactical depth.



WITHOUT YOU

AVICII INVECTOR eulogises the Swedish star with mournful passion. *By Harry Shepherd*

Videogames have the power to work miracles. Songs like Levels, Waiting for Love, and Wake Me Up soundtracked my evenings in nightclubs. I fuzzily recall grumbling, “You’ll never find me listening to this at 3.00am on a weeknight when I’m older.” Instead, the best part of ten years later, I’m doing exactly that. Except this time I’m toe-tapping away to Tim Bergling’s (aka Avicii) inoffensive earworms in my flat. And slippers.

This is thanks to *Avicii Invector*, but this isn’t your average rhythm-action game. The project that aimed to enhance Bergling’s brand of electronic dance and house music by combining it with interactive and mesmeric environments commenced in 2015, but the Swedish club sensation passed away in April 2018 before the game’s release. Hello There Games and Bergling’s team subsequently finished what had been left off, with a percentage of the proceeds going to the Tim Bergling Foundation, which supports those with mental health problems. It imbues the final experience with profound poignancy beneath the upbeat sheen of the Swedish DJ’s party anthems.

That final experience is 25 of Avicii’s biggest hits grouped into five distinct, ravishing worlds, and each song plays in a way reminiscent of *Amplitude* and *Thumper*. As you endeavour to match each note to the

corresponding one on your pad – I prefer this to the keyboard controls, but they work just fine – with the best timing possible on three different lane types that ensure that no song becomes a chore.

It imbues the final experience with profound poignancy

PURE GRINDING

First, and most simple, is a flat road where your ship merrily hops from one note to the next, but you’ll have to move laterally to hit them all. Then there are the triangular

pathways: here you flip the lane onto its relevant side, instead of moving right and left, and manoeuvring the wrong way can throw you way off as notes fly past you, upside down. The third and final type isn’t really a lane at all: it launches you away from a path altogether, giving you floating targets through which to zoom.

It’s in these moments that the neon grandeur of your environments stand out; eschewing a fixed path completely sees much of the UI disappear, letting you fully appreciate

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A rhythm-action game inspired by the now-deceased Swedish DJ

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Hello There Games

PUBLISHER
Wired Productions

REVIEWED ON
RX 480, i5-6500, 16GB RAM, HDD

MULTIPLAYER
Local split-screen, up to 4 players

LINK
invectorgame.com

environments filled with towering skyscrapers and craggy cliffs, all pulsating with the track you’re playing and exploding with colour. It plays a little like *Rez Infinite* as you’re relieved of the shackles of traditional notes and lanes.

Your charming pilot appears between-planets on your first playthrough in a series of short, nicely-drawn vignettes, but their story is incidental. That said, they are skippable and don’t appear again after your first playthrough, which should take one to two hours.

Of course, determined Avicii detractors will get little from *Invector*, but those on the fence will struggle to remain unmoved as everything falls into place. That said, the distribution of the 25 of the artist’s biggest hits that make up the game is a little off: the best-known are heavily concentrated in the City and Ice worlds.

While that isn’t necessarily a problem on your first go when everything feels fresh, it’s something that becomes more pronounced over time. After each song and planet is unlocked, it’s available on all three difficulties. But when I tried to launch straight into the mid-game City world after polishing off easy, the jump to medium proved too much at first. *Invector* does a good job of onboarding you to the next difficulty if you progress from beginning to end, but that may mean repeating your least favourites.

Despite that, *Avicii Invector* is an excellent, sometimes overwhelming, experience. While it’s impossible to know the state of the game when the DJ passed away, an infectious affection for Bergling’s work now oozes from the rush of each break to every cathartic drop. ■

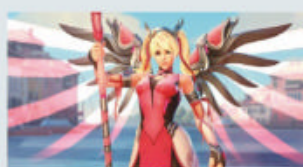
CHARITABLE CAUSES

Other games that raise money for those in need



DESERT BUS

Challenging players to drive for 8 hours real-time, this mind-numbing game has been used to raise over \$4 million for charity.



OVERWATCH

Blizzard released a pink skin for Mercy in May 2018. The total \$12.7 million takings went to the Breast Cancer Awareness Foundation.



FORTNITE

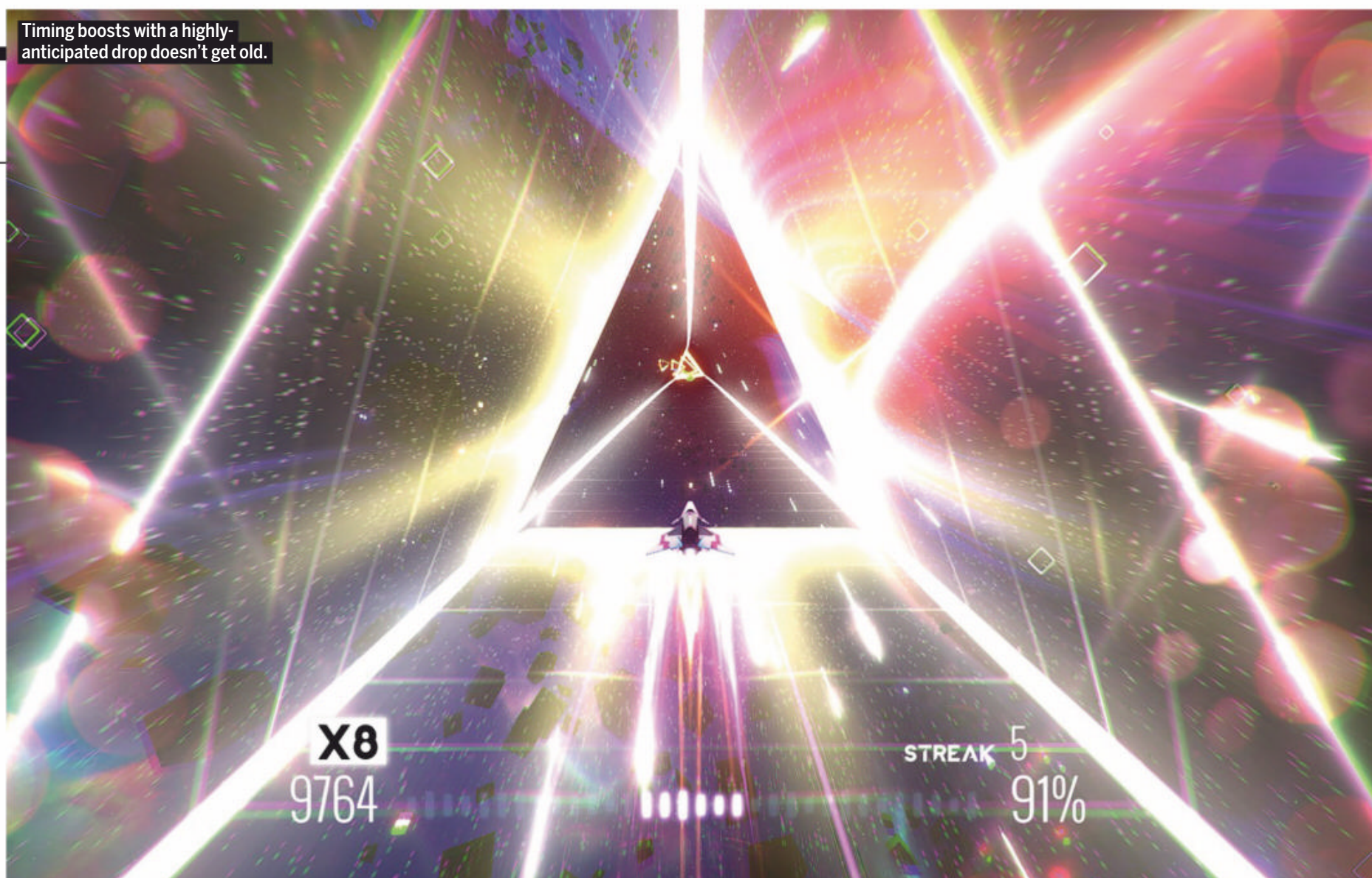
Epic Games organised a *Fortnite* tournament at E3 2018. The event raised \$3 million for competitors’ chosen causes.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A sumptuous fusion of sound, colour and love that even dance obstinate music-phobes should try out.

82

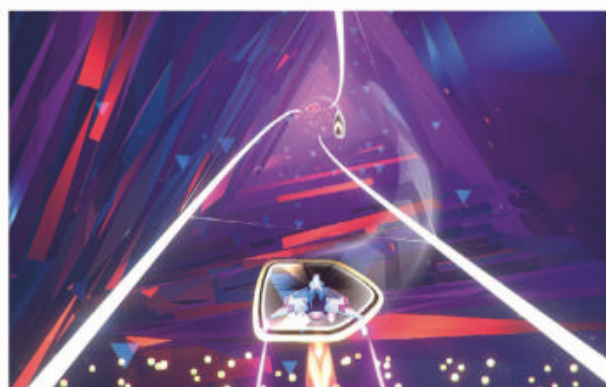
Timing boosts with a highly-anticipated drop doesn't get old.



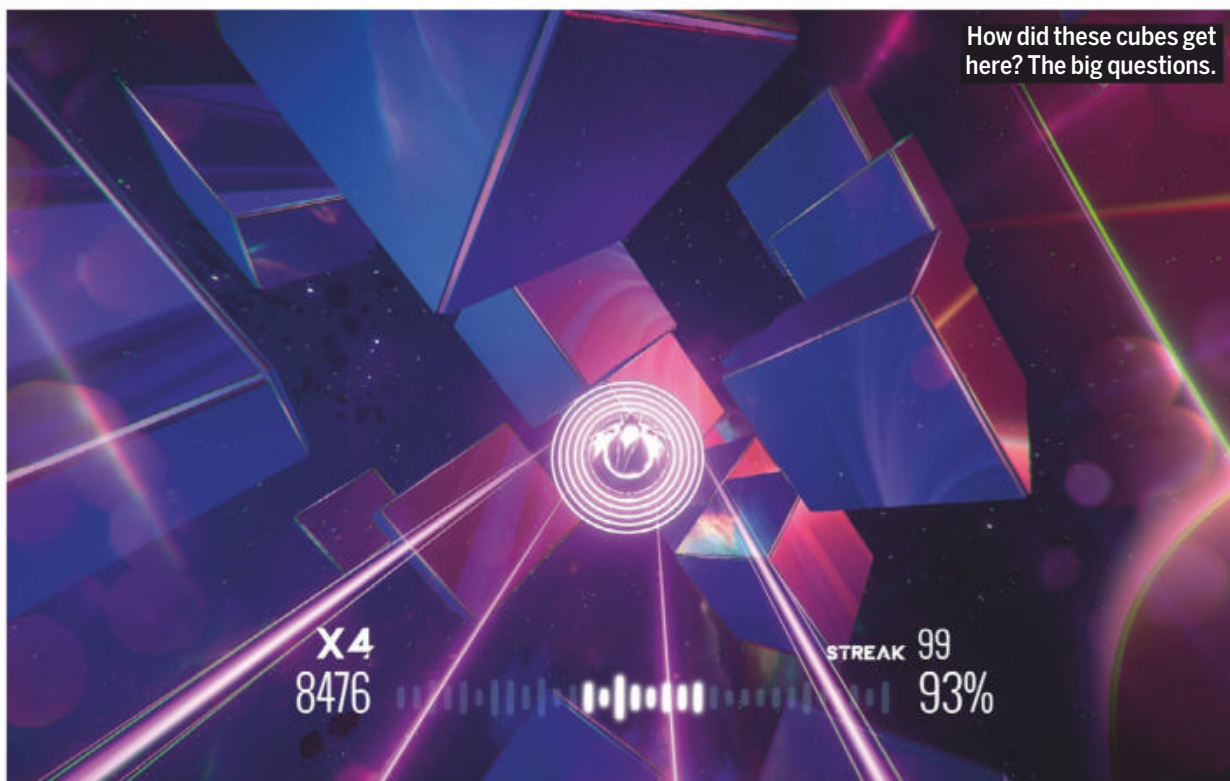
I, er, don't know what you're talking about...



Have you seen my chocolate bar?



This planet is Tatooine in the year 2130. True story.



How did these cubes get here? The big questions.

FRIEND ZONE

WATTAM finds cuteness and fun in everyday objects. *By Rachel Watts*

When *Katamari* released in 2004, it surprised players and critics with its joyous mechanics and soundtrack. It was an energetic, colourful bolt from the blue, and its creator, Keita Takahashi, was launched into the spotlight. Although *Katamari*, and his later game *Noby Noby Boy*, released over a decade ago, Takahashi's latest game, *Wattam*, has the same free-spirited imagination and playful sense of fun.

In *Wattam* you play as the Mayor, a green cube wearing a black bowler who sports a dapper moustache. But as happy as a fancy hat and facial hair would make me, the Mayor in *Wattam* is far from pleased. At the beginning, he is the sole character in a dark and empty world. But then, a tiny stone named David appears, and the two make quick friends. Suddenly, a rock named Robert spurts from the ground and joins in the fun.

More and more objects keep arriving and, before you know it, the world of *Wattam* is thriving with loads of cute everyday objects.

As each character joins the game's ever-growing community, you're given the ability to control whoever you like, from Michelle the small but spritely acorn to a giant table called Malcolm. Some of *Wattam*'s characters are blessed with special abilities – if you control the onion you'll make characters cry as you run

past them, or you can play as a huge tree that sucks characters into its mouth (don't worry – they grow back as fruit, of course).

When you're busy controlling one character, the others just goof around.

They climb on top of each other, hang out in groups and aimlessly run around. It's like watching a group of toddlers, and it's super adorable – well, apart from Kyle, the huge gaping mouth with its tongue hanging out

that chases after the food characters. He seriously needs to chill out.

The Mayor has the best ability, though. Hidden underneath that shiny bowler is a special surprise – it's a bomb! But this is a game by Takahashi, so it's a fun bomb. Characters explode into the sky with a burst of confetti and land in a fit of delightful giggles. After your vibrant display, they'll run up to you shouting "Kaboom!" demanding to be launched sky high once again.

With Wattam, it's like the joy of delving into an open toy box

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A fun adventure where you control a host of inanimate objects

EXPECT TO PAY

£14

DEVELOPER

Funomena

PUBLISHER

Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

annapurna.pictures/interactive/wattam

CHILD'S PLAY

Takahashi has created this bonkers box of fun objects to play with, but there's also a story that plays out. The Mayor and all the characters of this world have forgotten why they were all separated from each other in the first place, and this reason slowly gets revealed as more objects return.

This story pops its head in a couple of times and wraps up nicely in the finale, but your main activity revolves around helping characters solve their problems. These storylines are a little less post-apocalyptic and more Saturday morning cartoony. Its fun and childlike, like helping Deborah the balloon overcome her fear of heights or helping a telephone find its lost receiver. These mini missions convey *Wattam*'s core message, which boils down to: make friends and have fun. Which I think is just lovely but will, no doubt, not be for everyone.

Within all of *Wattam*'s frantic fun, I did run into a few hitches. The controls can be a bit finicky, and I had a constant battle with the camera in particular. When creating *Katamari*, Takahashi said in an interview that he wanted to capture the fun of when a child rolls a ball. With *Wattam*, it's like the joy of delving into an open toy box. You can gather all the fruit together and have them form a single giant tower, or you can go nick the Mayor's hat and make a toilet wear it instead.

What does the fan character do? Oh it creates a gust of air – now I want to run around knocking over all the characters. It's the same feeling as when you first honk in *Untitled Goose Game* – you're finding fun in silliness. Takahashi places that above all else, and even after a decade it's still a refreshing perspective. ■

CHARACTER CATALOGUE *Here are a handful of cute objects that you'll have the pleasure of meeting*



ABIGAIL THE TOILET

She likes to dunk characters in her bowl and flush them. They love it.



ELIZABETH THE SPOON

Her height makes her the perfect addition for an epic tower.



JACK THE FLOWER

A petit but gentle boy who likes to frolic with his flowery friends.



KYLE, THE GIANT MOUTH

Oh Kyle, you really need to learn about personal space and boundaries.

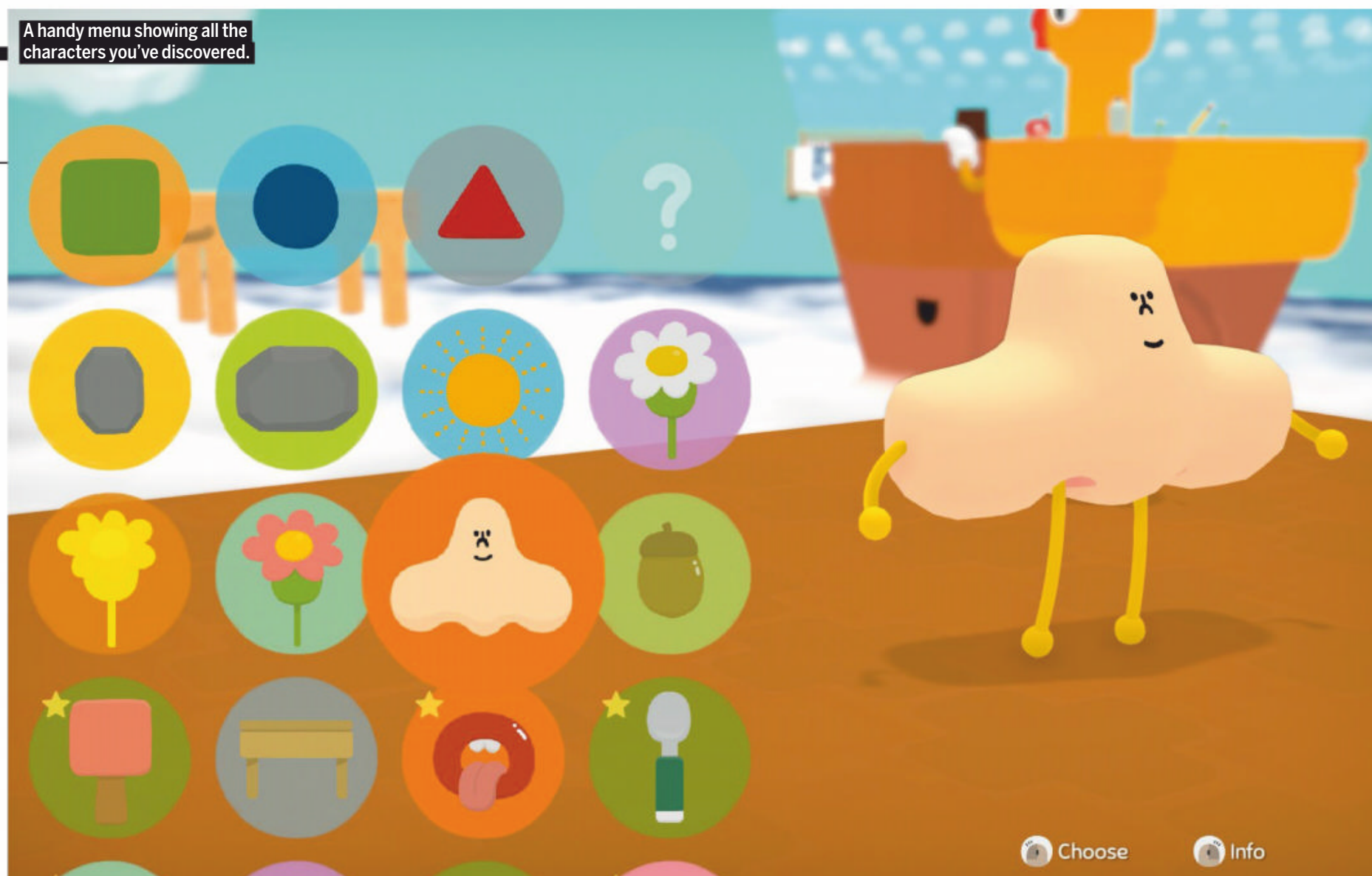
PC GAMER

VERDICT

A fun, friendly, and colourful toybox full of new friends. It's a not deep experience, but it's not trying to be.

76

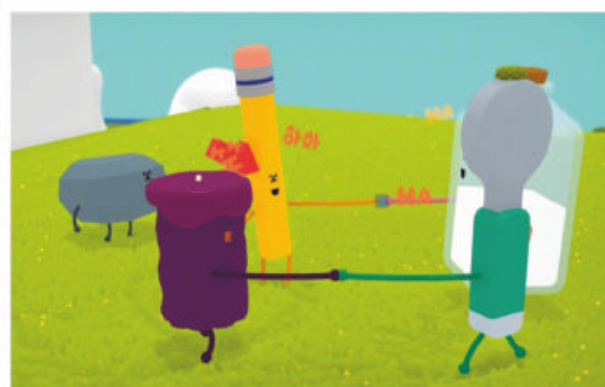
A handy menu showing all the characters you've discovered.



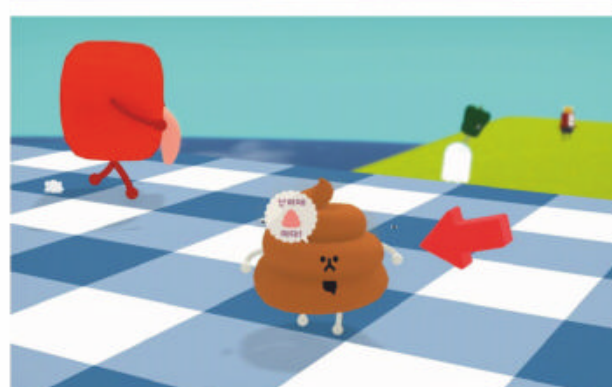
This is Michelle, the small but spritely acorn.



All seasons have been personified as islands.



This sushi is climbing a tree, encouraged by a nose.



The fan character has the ability to blow characters away.

CLONE WARS

In **DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN**, androids fight for their right to party. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

The titular city in *Detroit: Become Human* is a representation of a future industry. Best known as the centre of the US car industry and the birthplace of Motown, the city has fallen on hard times, but the virtual Detroit of 2038 has found a second life as heart of the android industry. This has left the populace unemployed all the same, causing them to mistreat their artificial servants. It's this injustice that causes androids to develop their own consciousness.

You follow the story of three such androids – Connor, a brand-new investigation unit developed to help the police with casework involving his errant brethren; Kara, a household model who rescues the small Alice from her abusive father; and Markus, another artificial butler who's falsely accused of harming his owner.

You take control of each in turn, following them through a chapter before switching to the next protagonist. If you've ever played either of Quantic Dream's previous titles *Heavy Rain* or *Beyond: Two Souls*, you know what kind of gameplay to expect – a mixture of interacting with items using Quantic Dream's cumbersome control scheme and mashing buttons during quicktime events. This way, action sequences such as chases are less thrilling and more anxiety-inducing thanks to the potential of pressing the wrong button and messing the whole thing up, but this is a marked

improvement over *Beyond: Two Souls*, most of which you spent as a poltergeist toppling items over. While the controls are much more coherent than that game, where no limb would ever respond to just one button, I still can't endorse them and recommend using a gamepad.

The quality of *Detroit* fluctuates with whose plotline you're playing

BLUESCREENED

The most important aspect of *Detroit* is without a doubt its story, ambitiously setting up a full-scale

android revolution with your three characters in the thick of it, and a myriad of branching storylines depending on your actions. It's the longest game by Quantic Dream so far, and the most intricate, to the point that after each completed chapter, you see a chart with each possible path.

From a narrative design perspective, it's impressive stuff, and you get to experience both dramatic choices with immediate impact as well as twists that don't occur until

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A moderately interactive adventure about androids developing their own consciousness

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Quantic Dream

PUBLISHER
Quantic Dream

REVIEWED ON
Core i5-8400, GTX 1060, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
quanticdream.com

much later. That's not to say every choice makes sense – some you can make contradict previously established motivations, but the point seems to be that they exist nonetheless, and that you get to make certain decisions yourself.

However, *Detroit* is still a game written by David Cage, as incapable of subtlety as ever. Whether it's equating the uprising of previously non-sentient beings with North America's enduring interracial struggle, to the point where androids travel in the back of the bus and later quote Martin Luther King Jr, or continuing to include female characters in his stories only to see them victimised.

Overall better than the previous games, the quality of *Detroit* fluctuates with whose plotline you're playing. The story of Connor, who is partnered with surly veteran Anderson, brings some much needed levity to a game otherwise as dramatic as can be, features the most-involved action scenes, and makes good use of the buddy cop trope. There's also some good detective gameplay, which has you find clues until Connor can put the MO together. By comparison, Markus gets to lead a revolution simply because he's there and turns out to be the most charismatic among a thoroughly unlikable band of bots, and Kara's main function is to be a vehicle for the glorifying of violence against women.

Each of the three main characters can die if you're not careful, but Kara's death leaves no dent on the plot, nor does she develop as a character. What you end up with is a game with very high production values, of which only one third of it is ever truly enjoyable. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Occasionally fun, *Detroit* takes steps in the right direction but retains too much of the old Quantic Dream formula.

61

HUMAN AFTER ALL *Some of the actors bringing Detroit to life*



HANK ANDERSON
CLANCY BROWN
Well-known for voiceover work such as *SpongeBob's* Mr Crabs, *Detroit* is Brown at his crabbiest.



CONNOR
BRYAN DECHART
A TV and film actor, Dechart has also become a popular streamer since *Detroit's* original release.

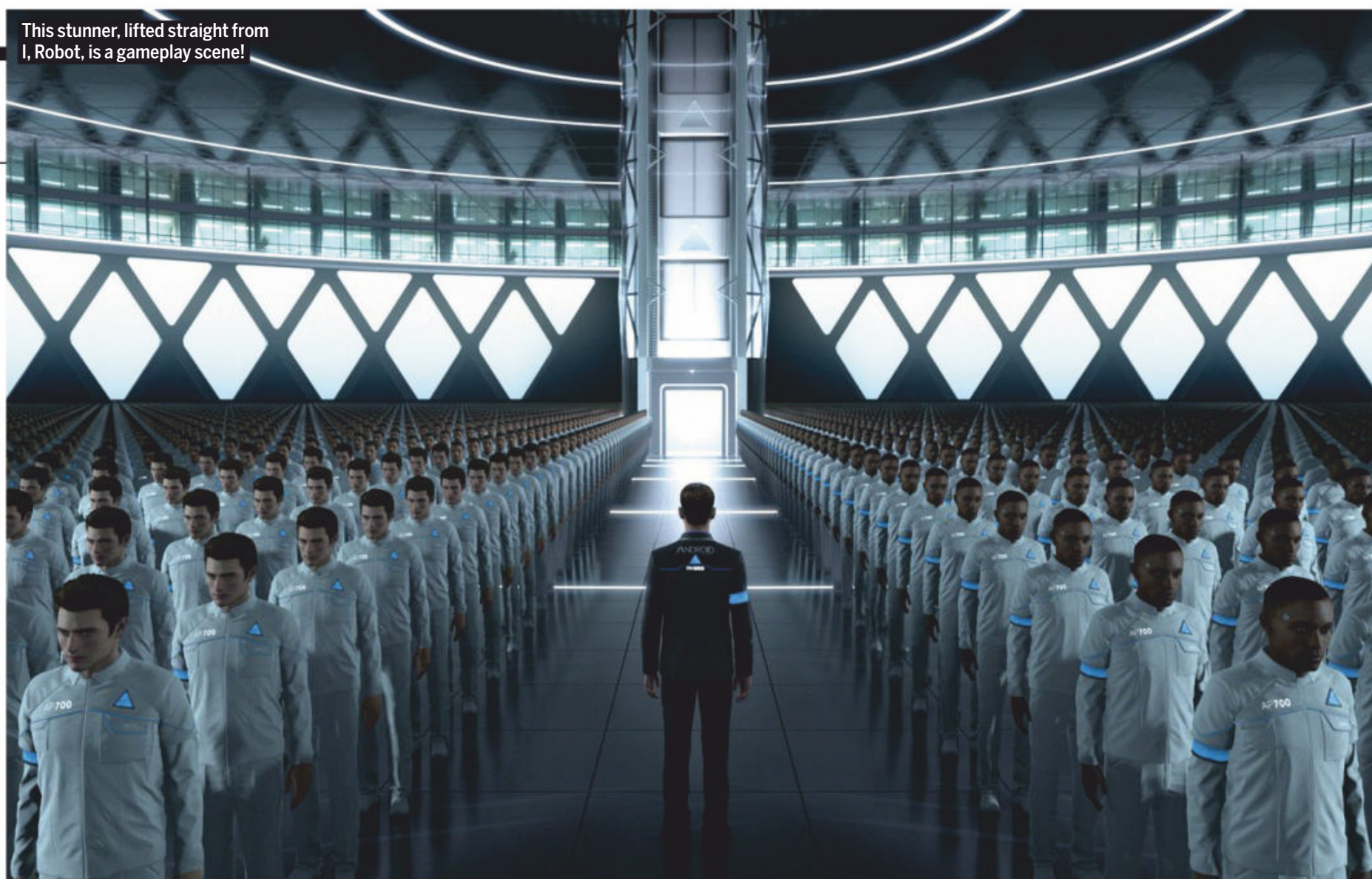


MARKUS
JESSE WILLIAMS
Actor and activist Williams is perhaps best-known for appearing on *Grey's Anatomy*.



NORTH
MINKA KELLY
Kelly has appeared on *Almost Human*, a TV show revolving around a cop and his android partner.

This stunner, lifted straight from I, Robot, is a gameplay scene!

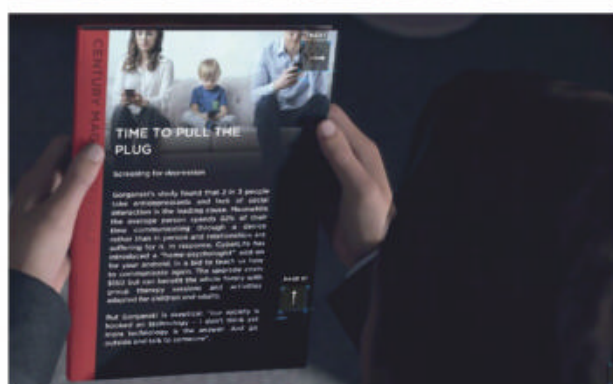


The interrogation sequences are enjoyably tense and never transparent.



This level of interactivity is fine to use the keyboard for.

The virtual marching was probably meant to... make people feel the plight.



No laughing at a crime scene, even one this melodramatic.



TOP OF THE FOOD CHAIN

It's not just the weather that's chilling in
MONSTER HUNTER WORLD: ICEBORNE. By Sam Greer

If you're already a fan and want to know as simply as possible if *Iceborne* justifies its price tag, then let me put it like this: I had 200 hours in *World* before this expansion, and I've racked up almost another 200 since I started it. So yes, there's a lot of bang for your buck. But if you're at all interested in *Monster Hunter* beyond a time sink, then *Iceborne* complicates *World* in both incredibly interesting and some deeply disappointing ways.

This beefy expansion is a mix of new monsters, regions, mechanics, and a whole new endgame, all geared towards veteran players. For those who dipped their toes in *World* or didn't see it to the end, *Iceborne* has almost nothing to offer.

Capcom has made this for its dedicated fanbase, and to its credit, managed to offer up not just something that will satisfy their desire for new content, but also provide a new

structure for the game's hunts that goes beyond simply offering 'more'.

There is a lot more however, with new region (though not the only one) Hoarfrost Reach adding a whole biome to expand the delight at the heart of *Monster Hunter*: getting to traipse around in its ecosystems and see how its monsters interact with them. Whether it's collapsing ice shelves or tearing up trees for battering rams, there's a sense of connection between its creatures and their surroundings that sells a rich, tactile world. Yet the better Capcom gets at this, the more convincingly animated and sounding their beasts,

the greater the tension between what the game says it is and what it is to actually play. There's always been an unease for me in playing these games where I'm asked to go out, invade the habitats of these species, and kill

them to make the next set of armour and weapons. With *World* the discomfort was extreme at times, beating monsters until they limped then being asked to lop off their tails to the sound of whines and squeals.

You don't just kill the monsters in these games – you make them suffer.

Engaging as its loop is, as enthralling as its fights are, I've always been disappointed that they've created such a rich ecosystem and the only thing they can ask me to do in it is murder everything.

PALICO HUNTER

Iceborne does dabble in some alternatives with a new sidequest asking you to go out and document the tribes of cats in the world with a camera. For an hour or two I got to see what *Monster Hunter* might be like if it were more *Pokemon Snap*

It goes so
against the
charm of so
much of the
game

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An expansion to the combat heavy monster fighter

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

REVIEWED ON
64-Bit Windows 7,
Nvidia GeForce
GTX-970, Intel
i7-4790K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

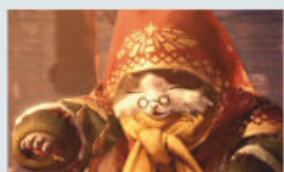
LINK
[monsterhunter.com/
world-iceborne/us](http://monsterhunter.com/world-iceborne/us)

and the result was surprising. Details I'd never seen before kept revealing themselves now I was taking my time to observe. It's a small thing, but a glimpse of what a kinder game could be like, making it all the more apparent what a cruel game *Monster Hunter* actually is.

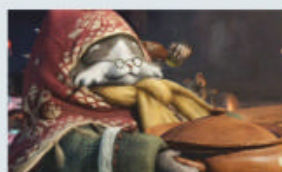
It's never stopped me having a blast with the game, but *Iceborne* makes it even harder to ignore as it lays on the story as heavy as *World*, with cutscene after cutscene having our cast of hunters tackle their nature. By tackle, I mean claim to be part of the ecosystem and that by killing these monsters they're somehow preserving things. It's a preposterous notion (our hunters aren't even from this continent!), but that the characters discuss it suggests Capcom is at least aware of the dissonance in its story. Yet rather than actually address this or just go on ignoring this aspect of its world building, *Iceborne* lands on an awkward middle ground, drawing attention to the moral bankruptcy of its characters with a nonsense lie. If these games are going to continue to ask me to think about their world then they need to spend more time entertaining the notion that its hunters are the bad guys.

It goes so against the charm and warmth of so much of the game too, something that *Iceborne* excels at. The cosy new hub Seliana is a winter getaway full of delights, new mini games, and even saunas. The new chef, the Grammeowster, is a character of such sheer delight that I audibly squealed the first time I saw her cooking cutscene. All of this gets put to use with a vital overhaul of the game's social space, with the Seliana Gathering Hub giving players an area where they can actually spend time together between hunts, letting you craft and access all the vendors alongside one another. It pushes *Monster Hunter* into a much more readily shared experience, making the game feel like a nightly event. You can all be jumping into the same

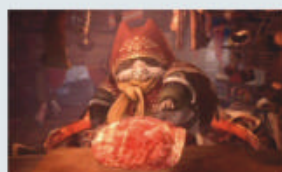
KINDEST CAT *Four NPCs to care about in Iceborne*



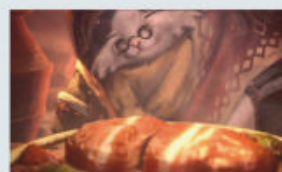
1 GRAMMEOWSTER CHEF
Look at her! She'll not let you go with an empty tum.



2 GRAMMEOWSTER CHEF
No, but really, isn't she just adorable?!



3 GRAMMEOWSTER CHEF
She just wants to cook you a good meal!

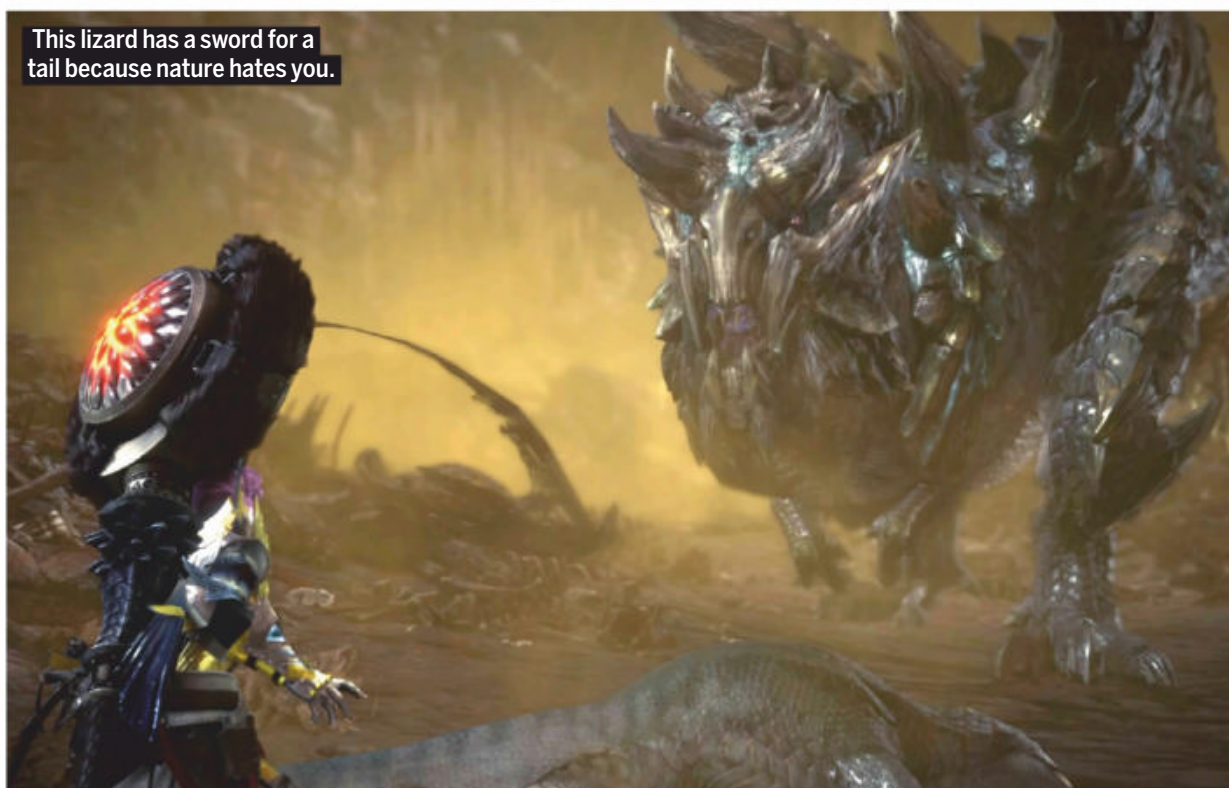


4 GRAMMEOWSTER CHEF
Yeah, sure, there's other NPCs, but who cares?

The game has a lot of cutscenes saying very little.



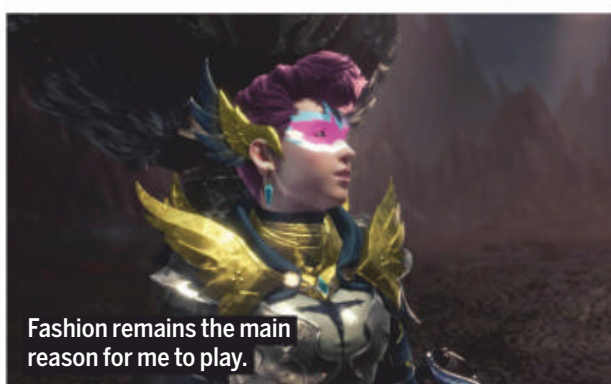
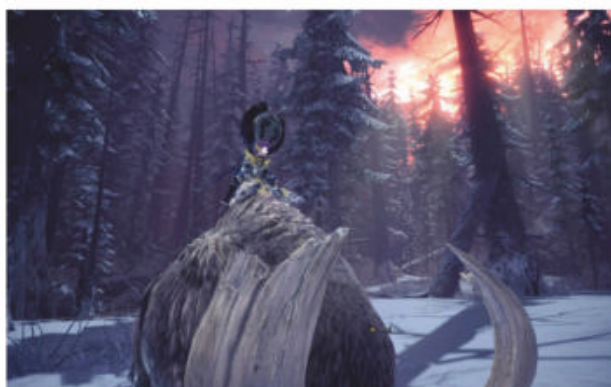
This lizard has a sword for a tail because nature hates you.



Iceborne's poster child is fittingly one of its best monsters.



Nice work. The base is coming along well.



Fashion remains the main reason for me to play.



The icy locales are extremely evocative.



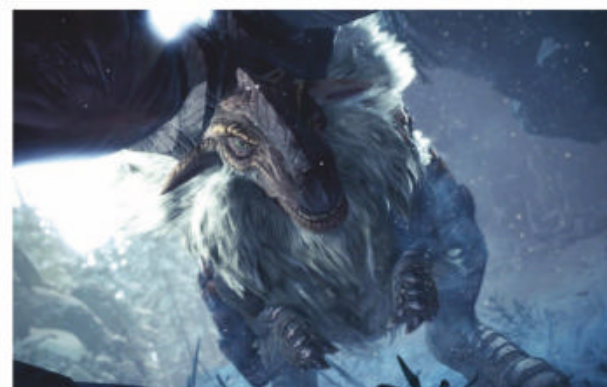
It tries and fails to engage with its world on a deeper level.



Meals are still a vital part of the game and more exquisite than ever.



Watching two monsters duke it out is still a highlight.



» hunts or off doing your own thing, but you all come back to that same space to hang out, muck about with gestures, show off new weapons, or splash in the pool. No, for real, there are hot pools now.

The craft that goes into all the details of these spaces is absurd and so vital to offsetting the unpleasant moments where you brutally murder a monster fighting for its life. But the juxtaposition between these elements becomes harder to reconcile when the game keeps drawing attention to them. There are long cutscenes discussing the Guild's role in the world, dozens of conversations about how all this hunting and killing can be considered 'study' as if Capcom is beginning to get cold feet about the whole enterprise.

Yet, in spite of my misgivings, it has to be said that nothing has battles quite like *Monster Hunter*, and *Iceborne* is the challenge I'd been waiting on since mastering *World*. The new fights feel crafted to poke at the weak points in a player's preparation and tricks. If it's not the cold eating at your stamina, it's monsters dripping explosive goo everywhere or wiping you off the map by summoning waves of water. The imagination on display is maintained right through to the final fight, finding ways to surprise and challenge even the most experienced of hunters. No easy feat given the game's elaborate nature, and doubly so when *Iceborne* piles on new mechanics. The grappling claw that lets you latch onto monsters at will to steer them into obstacles opens up a whole new skillset to master, and one that changes everything in the base game too. *Iceborne* isn't a full-blown sequel, but it still has touches of the radical that revitalises a game that's still thriving. Like the regions of its game world, *Iceborne* feels alive, bursting at the seams with things to try and master. Importantly, it all feels substantial and integrated into the game in ways that complements what's already there instead of just being gimmicks to artificially expand the game's scope. When it comes to the monster hunting itself, *Iceborne* is the game at its peak.

A note on performance: *Monster Hunter World* is a much more stable PC game than it was at launch, and

FOR SHAME *Monsters graded on the guilt I felt for killing them*



since *Iceborne* is an extension of the same build, it performs as you'd expect. An extra graphical option for snow will tax your GPU RAM a touch more if you crank it up, but that's about it. A few performance patches made 60fps at 1080p easier to hit for most mid-range PCs and improvements to mouse and keyboard controls have since made *MHW* feel right at home on PC, but it's still a hog at higher settings and resolutions. With the High Resolution Texture Pack installed and everything turned up, I sit between 60-90 fps depending on the action when testing with a GTX 2080 and

an i9-9900K. You'll need a top tier PC to see *MWH* at its best, but it still looks and runs much better than the console versions on medium settings on mid-range PCs.

The endgame is a promising new kind of format for the series

MALE GAZE

If there's one disappointment besides the iffy storyline, it's the fact that the game still has gendered armour sets and insists on making half of the women's outfits a combo of boob armour and bikinis. If the game's whole style was impractical outfits then maybe it'd sit better, but when the dudes are rocking elaborate but practical armour, it's sad to see the women stuck with mini skirts, their asses pushed into the camera through every crawl space.

Worse, the other half of the women's armour is great, stylish stuff. So why these fumbles? It's an objectifying gaze that I'd hoped the series would've grown out of.

No matter my complaints there's no denying how compelling *Monster Hunter* remains and how much

Iceborne excels at improving the fundamental experience. The endgame is a promising new kind of format for the series that makes its hunts feel more organic instead of the trawls through the quest board that the game utilises most of the time. This new region, called the Guiding Lands, is unlocked upon completion of the main quest. A vast area that includes all the biomes of existing regions, it keeps you out in the world, keeps the monsters coming and reacts to the ones you hunt. It is reactive in a way that's so well suited to the liveliness of the game's eco system, new monsters emerging in response to the lesser beast you just put down. If Capcom can continue to build on it then it might not just be a fantastic endgame for *Iceborne* but the future for the *Monster Hunter* series as a whole. It simply feels like the culmination of everything *World* was trying to bring to the series. Couple that with the polish on the multiplayer side and I continue to lose hours to this game.

There's so much substantial content here, so much to see and do, it feels like one of those ludicrous platters the hunters are served before a quest. Of course, part of that feast is a plethora of cutscenes that construct a clumsy storyline the game could have done without. Perhaps Capcom will one day find a way to engage more carefully with its themes. Until then I'll enjoy the platter they're offering but it can't help leaving me feeling a little empty at times. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Iceborne fails to explore its more uncomfortable themes but delivers the series' most potent monster hunting yet.

82

A FURTHER CRY

Ex-Ubi veterans invite you on a
JOURNEY TO THE SAVAGE PLANET. By Phil Iwaniuk

It looks like *No Man's Sky* and it's made by *Far Cry 4* director Alex Hutchinson, so perhaps it's best to start with which games *Journey to the Savage Planet* is *not* like. Although you and a co-op partner find yourself on a distant planet, it isn't anything like as non-linear or as vast as *No Man's Sky*. And sure, there's a gun occupying the bottom-right of the screen, but *Far Cry* in space it is not. What Typhoon Studios has made with its debut title is something else entirely.

Something that gives you a real sense of being stranded in a huge and uncharted alien environment, but carefully curates your path through it. That path takes you through platforming sequences, boss battles, mob fights, and environmental puzzles, and often calls upon you to double back and use a new bit of kit in an old area to access previously out of reach places. It does all this while regularly making me laugh along with its story beats, and making me care about its central mystery: if the planet's supposedly bereft of intelligent life, what's that enormous tower doing right in the middle of it?

It's a comedy-Metroidvania-survival-shooter-platformer, then. As a Kindred Aerospace employee shot out into the farthest reaches of who-knows-where to chart the planet and see if there's anything worth the company's time, you find yourself in a pickle when – stop me if you've heard this one – your spacecraft's damaged during landing. A voyage of discovery's required to

survive and source the parts needed to fuel your journey back home. A simplistic enough setup, but it has real life breathed into it by the outright silliness of *JTTSP*'s writing, including live action commercial spoofs and memorable Facetimes with your CEO. Humour's famously subjective, but even the behaviour of the loading bar on the vessel computer got me. Really. A funny loading bar.

The game might even be hoisted on its own petard here, because when it's played in co-op, it's easy to let your Discord bantz drown out the jokes, or to race ahead without stopping to appreciate the details. In fact, this may actually work better as a solo game all-round, where you only need worry about one person being lost instead of two.

It's an interesting mix of aggressive wildlife, cutesy fauna, and joyously weird scenery that entices you deeper once you're outside the safety of your crashed ship, and *JTTSP* plays on this deviously. Pufferbirds, the first sentient beings

It's a comedy-Metroidvania-survival-shooter-platformer

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A survival-Metroidvania hybrid with jokes

EXPECT TO PAY
£24

DEVELOPER
Typhoon Studios

PUBLISHER
Epic Games

REVIEWED ON
i7 9700K, RTX 2080 TI, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
savageplanetgame.com

you encounter, are at least 50 per cent eyeball, and their trusting coos are impossible not to find endearing. In a purely mechanical sense, they exist to produce carbon when you feed them Grob. What's more pertinent is that if you overfeed Pufferbirds in your quest for carbon, they simply pop. Worse, the only way I found to make it past a meat vortex (think organic waste disposal) was to lure those wide-eyed, innocent Pufferbirds into vortex-sucking range and continue along the path while they were being eviscerated.

FIGHTING FAUNA

Very little of the plants and creatures around you is there just to fill the space, and there's a mild puzzle element to almost everything with a pulse. The bee-like critters who plague your progress at the base of the tower can all be killed in one fell swoop by shooting their hive, while the amber shields on some enemies can be corroded by the acidic fruit of blight bomb plants.

The irony is that the closer you come to fuelling your ship and starting the journey back home, the more bewitching your current climate becomes. The simple rules of each biome – use grapple seeds to scale the cliffs of Mt Gzarfyn, double-jump between the mushroom pads of the Fungi of Si'ned VII, lob blight bombs in the Matriarch's Lair – become a kind of second nature that roots you to the place and turns a once totally alien landscape into something fondly familiar. It's not doing something radical in its own right, but the blend of established genres and mechanics at the heart of *Journey to the Savage Planet* are still expertly chosen and woven together like a muso's mixtape. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

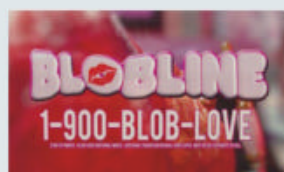
Funny, fresh, and full of surprises, Typhoon's debut blends genres expertly. Co-op doesn't add much, though.

84

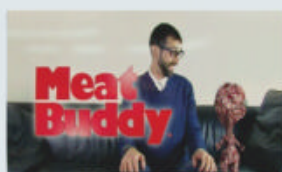
BUY NOW, SLAVE LATER *Weird products for sale on Kindred TV*



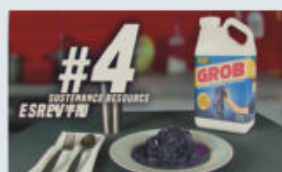
MINI MALL MONKEYS
See tiny people shop, then declare a Black Friday and watch them turn feral.



BLOBLINE
Chat to some of the hottest formless blobs in the galaxy. Discreet, steamy... blobby.



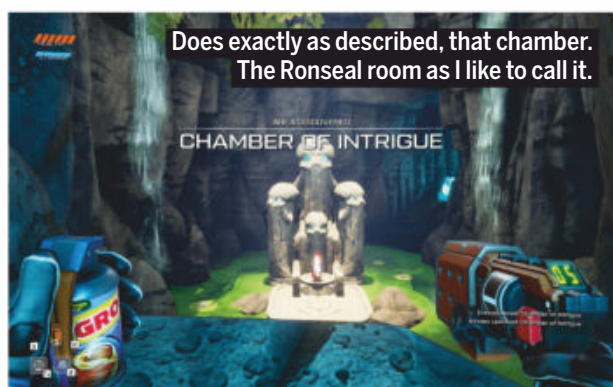
MEAT BUDDY
Reanimate your excess animal matter in this handy device. Not much fun for vegans though.



GROB
The galaxy's number four sustenance source. The numbers speak for themselves really.



It's the return of *Bioshock Infinite's* traversal system! Welcome back, floaty rails.



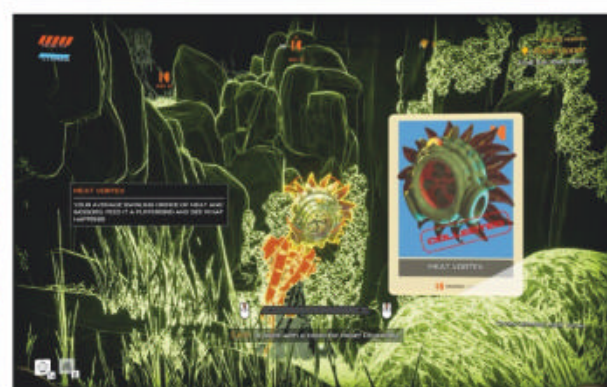
Does exactly as described, that chamber. The Ronseal room as I like to call it.



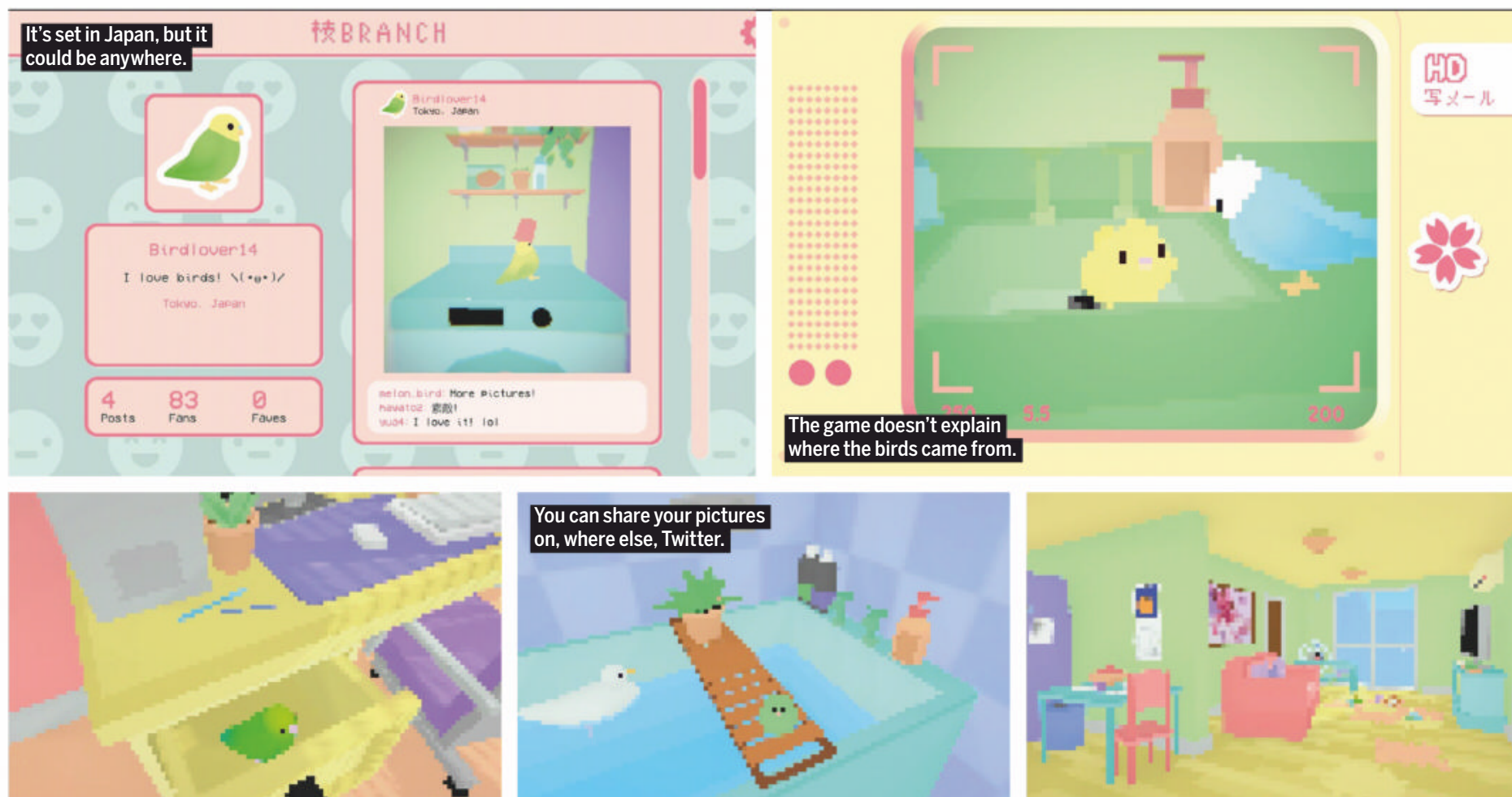
Quite hot for platforming down here, but platform you must.



I see your eyes rolling, but these videos are actually funny.



There's a real kick to reaching a new biome and taking in the sights.



TWEET-'EM-UP

Bird is the word in chirpy photography game **TORIPON**

For some reason, your home has been invaded by birds. Or perhaps 'invaded' is the wrong word. The upbeat music, jaunty colour scheme, and general cuteness of the birds suggests you've invited them here on purpose, and that they're perfectly happy to flap about inside your flat. What do you get out of this peculiar arrangement? Naturally, you take pictures of your feathered friends and post them on social media, roaming around your home like you're in a compact Pokemon Snap.

There are three phases to this laid-back photography game. The first is exploration, as you search for birds that are doing interesting things. You might find a duck taking a bath, or a cute bird hitching a ride on a roving Roomba hoover. You'll want to whip out your phone and take a photo of these adorable scenes, and luckily that's the entire point of the game. Your phone's camera is only a button away, and your chirpy friends are only too happy to repeat their animations, over and over, while you stand there taking their pictures.

The next step – in modern life and in this game – is to mine your photo for social media standing. Another keyboard press uploads the pic to Not Instagram, where it will garner likes and randomised comments that are

kept vague enough that they could apply to your photo.

That's *Toripon* in a nutshell. You explore your flat, you take bird pics, and then you share them on the internet. You can do that for as long, or for as little, as you wish. As you check off avians in your notebook, new species will gradually appear inside your flat – but where exactly? It's time to check the living room, or the kitchen, to see what's changed.

Toripon successfully captures one of the best parts of social media: namely sharing things with others, for near instant feedback.

Watching the numbers go up is still pretty satisfying here, even if it begins to feel hollow after a while, without any other actual humans to judge your work.

The next step is to mine your photo for social media standing

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A game where you take photos of birds, and upload them to social media

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Victoria Smith

PUBLISHER
Victoria Smith

REVIEWED ON
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz,
6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/toripon

Still, social media without nazis. It's worth a look.

WATCH THE BIRDIE

The elephant in the aviary is that *Toripon* looks like an imploded cataract, with a heavy pixelation effect that obscures many of the finer details of its colourful world. There's an option in the menu to remove the pixel filter, something that definitely makes the game easier on the eyes, but that takes away from the 'pixel hunt' nature of the exploration.

Where the filter helps, I feel, is in the character of birds whose 3D models achieve, with the filter active at least, a convincing three-dimensional-pixel-art aesthetic. They look so cute and cartoony that you'll want to immediately capture their mischief and share it with the world. That's the point of this laid-back game that exists in its own, once-removed bird dimension. Pay it a visit, see some birds, and report your findings to an oddly chirpy internet. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Play at social media and at photography in this cute bird-'em-up that offers an hour or two of pleasant distraction.

79

DASHIN' PROJECT

Be the wolf among us in **SEALED BITE**

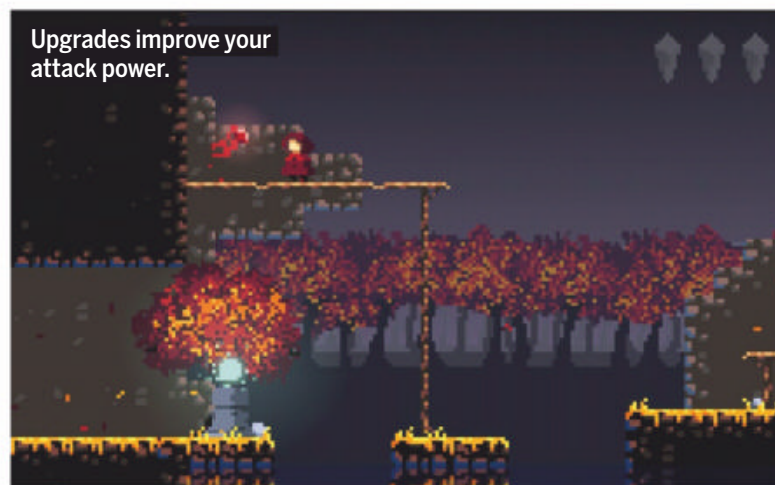
Has there been a better platforming feature this year than *Celeste's* air-dashing? It's a game that feels great to play, from the wall-jumping to that thrilling aerial leaping – a joy that this small jam game manages to recapture. *Sealed Bite* uses air-dashing in the context of a *Metroidvania*. You unlock the power almost immediately, and it's how you get about inside its gorgeous autumnal world.

After being bitten by a werewolf, your mute traveller gains the ability to ping through the air, providing there happens to be an enemy nearby. Hold the attack button down and time slows to a crawl, as you select your victim, and then you teleport to their position. You generally use the power to clear large gaps, or to ascend to distant platforms, but it was so satisfying to execute that I

found myself using it on pretty much every enemy I came across.

Sealed Bite nails its platforming movement, providing you with plenty of tough jumping puzzles as you explore, and backtrack, around its compact world. That world looks gorgeous, with an evocative autumn/winter colour palette, and some lovely visual effects including water reflections and lazily drifting leaves. But where a game like *Celeste* has been engineered to perfection – so that you rarely feel frustrated even as you die, again and again – this is a game that fosters fury, and rather quickly. Why am I thrown back to the last save pillar upon death, rather than respawning at the entrance to the current room? It's not a problem in the more laid-back *Metroidvanias*, but, with its precise leaps and its insta-death pits, this is a game rather more keen to murder you. ■

72



NEED TO KNOW

DEVELOPER
securas

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
securas.itch.io

SMASHING

Feline feng shui in **THROW IT DOWN (TO EARTH)**

There's a famous YouTube video where a cat pushes a glass off a table, seemingly in a spirit of wilful destruction. Between that and *Untitled Goose Game*, you could make a case for animals being utter jerks – but, in both cases, it feels like there's a human behind the scenes, pulling the strings. *Throw it Down (to Earth)* understands this. It makes you the conductor of chaos, by giving you a baton (here a laser pointer) with which to direct the animal mayhem as you desire.

There's a cat on your desk. It's got tentacles and it's purple so it's technically a space cat, but there are no meaningful differences otherwise. Like all cats, probably, the space cat can't resist chasing after a laser dot, and you use this to... ruin all your stuff? Over two stages, you'll frantically wave the dot around,

making the cat knock your possessions off the edge of a table. But – and here's the rub – you have to do it without injuring the cat in the destructive process.

Is this a game? A physics experiment? Yes. But those physics feel fantastic, with a satisfying, horrific heft as, say, your monitor tumbles to the floor. Imagine how fun it would be to throw your TV out of the window, to watch it smash without having to worry about the mess. *Throw it Down* is that, as a game, but with the added stress of trying to keep the cat topside.

Gleeful chaos eventually gives way to precision ruining. Catharsis gives way to strategy, frustration and innumerable restarts.

When it reminds you it's a game, this becomes a lot less exciting. But the relief when you finally beat it is palpable. ■

66



NEED TO KNOW

DEVELOPER
23edsa

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
23edsa.itch.io

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



WESSEX EDUCATION

TOTAL WAR SAGA: THRONES OF BRITANNIA proves Mercia is for the weak

It might seem like I'm starting with the strap and working backwards, Alan Partridge-style, but *Thrones of Britannia* is the most revisitable of all the *Total War* games. To some, it's the spin-off that tried too hard to be different. If Wes Anderson made a movie personifying the *Total War* games, *Thrones* would be the one played by Willem Dafoe who only eats raw meat.

But is it really that radical? Less so now than ever. A stream of patches has followed since release, recalibrating the game and addressing some complaints. War Fervour is gone. And it's now possible to issue decrees, similar to *Warhammer II*'s rites, which offer temporary faction bonuses for a price. The result is a game that retains the pacy, streamlined feel of the vanilla release, but with fewer of the irritating niggles.

I start a new game as West Seaxe, the Manchester United of Anglo-Saxon powers. I'm immediately reminded what I love about *Thrones*. I have loads of small, distinctive settlements that feel easy to manage. In some *Total War* games you get the feeling there's always some other building browser or sub-menu that'll make your life easier. But here, the options are laid

before you like a buffet of sheep herds and tithe halls. I'm into the region-specific landmarks, too – there are loads of unique buildings that aren't limited to your biggest settlements, so the whole thing feels like a National Trust prequel with more skewering. Somehow, this makes me feel more connected to my settlements; like I'm making bold decisions that change the fates of real people.

The early game for West Seaxe is a breeze.

I'm powerful enough that people leave me alone, which gives time to take stock and prepare to crush the neighbours who've so kindly left me alone. I decide to conquer London. It's nothing personal. I rather like London. But it's made the mistake of belonging to another faction when I need it to complete one of my regions. It's like I have a foot attached

Feels like a National Trust prequel with more skewering

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
If Paradox made a Horrible Histories game

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER
SEGA

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/37xZnVE

to my body that someone else controls. Worse still, it makes it harder for me to quash the civil unrest in neighbouring counties because I don't have control of the region. But there's a problem: the 'attack' option is greyed out. Apparently, a pre-existing peace treaty is preventing me adding the city to my collection – something I have to Google to work out, in a moment of immersion-shattering confusion. Æthelred the Ungoogle doesn't have the same ring to it.

ISLE OF DOUGS

Peace treaties end and cities fall, and *Thrones* hits most of the beats I want from a history game. My heir dies in a viking raid. I have a perpetual spat with a disloyal lord called Hrotheward, who I definitely didn't have killed. In the Wes Anderson *Total War* movie, this is the moment we learn Dafoe's character isn't so different from the others. Possibly while devouring a chop. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Swift and backstabby, *Total War Saga: Thrones of Britannia* still feels like a pleasantly different *Total War* game.

79

CUMAN NATURE

A need for mead in **KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE**

It's hard enough to pick up the thread of a game when the fate of the free world rests in your hands. Stay away long enough and it's often impossible to remember what you were doing or why, no matter how important it was. And it's even harder in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, a game with missions that include, 'meet a woman', 'collect nettles' and 'wash'. But that's precisely the thrill of Warhorse Studios's cabbagey peasant-'em-up. Few games make doing nothing matter this much.

I spend at least ten minutes trying to work out what momentous act I managed last time I played. Turns out it was learning to read. That might sound low key to you, a reader, who's so great at reading that they're reading right now. But for Henry – a friendly, semi-sentient turnip in borrowed ring mail – it's a pretty big

deal. I even drop a cool 55 groschen on a new book about brewing good mead, the most disappointing beverage in the universe. The recipe's decent, but it's a steep price for what appears to be three pages. Perhaps it's a big font. Even so, I enjoy the act of sitting in a sunbeam and burying Henry's root vegetable head in a tome. It's everything I love about *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

I manage to make locating my horse more complicated that it should be, too. I scour the map looking for a pony symbol then realise all I need to do is fast travel, whistle, and Pebbles will magically appear. Having transport helps remind me how big the world feels. I learn about paganism! Buy pretzels!

I won't remember any of this when I come back; but right now, I'm in a turd-flecked paradise of bonfires and dysentery. ■

86

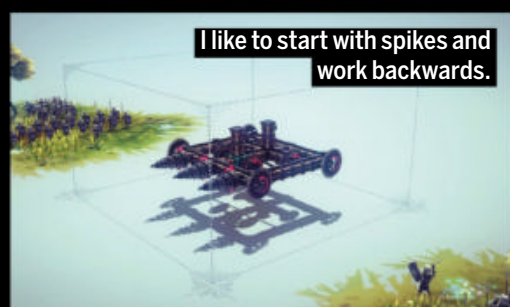


NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
\$25

DEVELOPER
Warhorse Studios

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver



BESIEGE

Everything I make in *Besiege* ends up looking like something from a Warhammer geometry book for toddlers. It's not just a square on wheels: it's a hate-forged slaughterquad; an agonybox; a doomdeathahedron. It's a testimony to my complete and crushing lack of practical skills and that's why I adore *Besiege*. I can create the most dangerous vehicles imaginable without any risk to life or limb.

For example: my latest hatesquare gets stuck on the production line because I haven't left enough room for wheels. I feel like a crab drawing on a wall with a crayon, in that I have no idea what I'm doing and it's fun in a way I can scarcely comprehend. ■

83



RECETTEAR: AN ITEM SHOP'S TALE

Recettear is like a soothing balm after *Kingdom Come's* muck. At least, it is until 1) I realise that the world of commerce is basically just war with maths; and 2) even haggling with NPCs brings me out in hives. But it's such a fun concept. Go to dungeons. Find loot. Sell it. In fact, I think I like this more than the inventory management that comes with most RPGs. I never need to worry about ruining my OOTD with the wrong cowl just because the stats are better, and I'm not going to accidentally junk the Sword That Saves Mankind because I'm intentionally selling absolutely everything. ■

75



REIGNS

There's something pleasant about the immediacy of *Reigns* – even if every decision I make has negative consequences. If nothing else, it's taught me to stop sharing. The original still feels very much like a mobile game – especially compared to the follow up, *Her Majesty* – but the writing is pin sharp and the stories are compelling. And more than this, fecklessly swiping past so many thoughtfully crafted narratives itself feels like behaviour of a debauched monarch. Bite-sized autocratic brilliance. ■

80

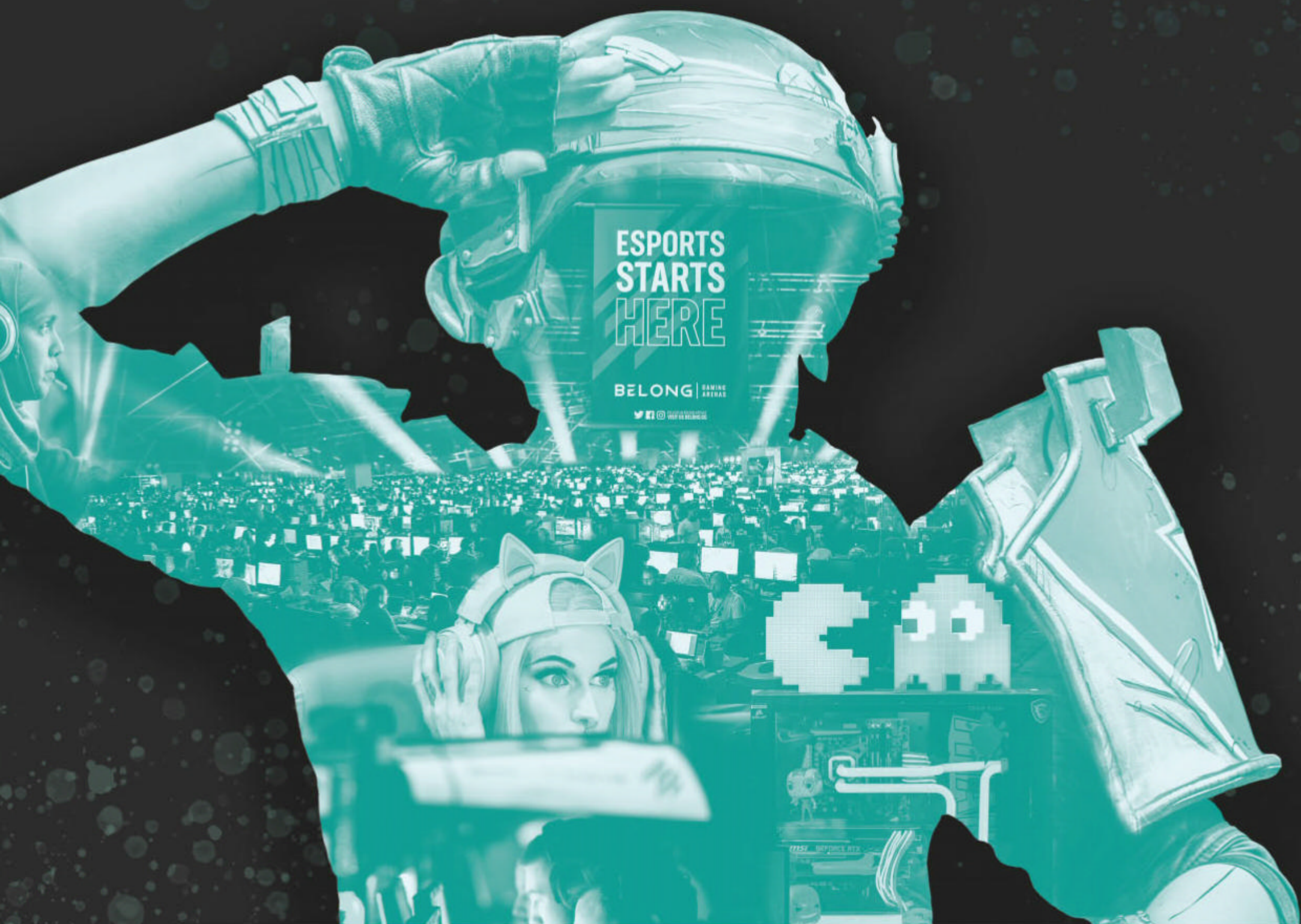
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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



96

GROUP TEST

The best headsets money can buy.

100

TECH REPORT

Has Google achieved quantum supremacy?



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Find the perfect PC parts for you.

GROUP TEST

GAMING HEADSETS

Our top picks for the best gaming headsets that offer sound, comfort and style for the most immersive PC gaming experience

By Jorge Jimenez and Rob Dwiar

When deciding what makes our best gaming headsets list, we look for a number of key features. Sound quality and price point are always important, but what sets these gaming headsets apart is that they offer more than just good sound at a decent price. Some offer surround sound, haptic feedback, or extreme comfort. You don't need to max out your credit cards to grab one of the best gaming headsets. For under £100, you can pick the HyperX Cloud Alpha wired gaming headset which is currently sitting at the top of our list for its killer sound and sturdy build. It's not the only option though – read on for our complete list.



HOW WE TEST

We haven't given up on good old-fashioned testing by ear. Each headset that we test we use daily for at least a week. We record a sample of our voice in Audacity and compare it to previous recordings from other models, then head to Discord to get some feedback from our friends on how we're sounding.

During that week, we aim to test each headset in a number of different game genres – shooters, battles royale and racing games make for particularly good testing scenarios since the former tends to test the low-end and reveal muddiness and distortion, while *PUBG* et al are great for positional audio tracking. Finally, good racing sims feature a very particular mix designed to help you hear brake lock-up and tires losing traction. It's often in *Project CARS 2* where great headsets are separated from the merely good.

It's not just about gaming, though: we wear the headsets while we work, listen to music, watch distracting YouTube videos people send us, and everything else that crops up while we're at our desk. Finally, we compare a few lossless music tracks by listening through our Beyerdynamic DT770s and then the test sample. The 770s have a really flat EQ that makes them great for music production and critical listening applications – hearing another headset immediately after them really brings EQ peaks and troughs into focus.



Cloud Alpha

HYPERX £80

A well-rounded, well-balanced headset for game audio

1 The newest Cloud Alpha presents excellent sound and build quality, with the essential features done well, and no feature-flab inflating the price. The stereo soundscape in this closed-back design is punchier in the low end than we'd usually go for, but the extra bass doesn't interfere with clarity – and frankly, in games and music environments, it sounds great. Each 50mm driver's dual chamber design is intended to give low, medium and high frequencies space to resonate without interfering with each other, and you do get a sense of that while listening to them.

Elsewhere it's the usual impressive build quality, generous padding, clear mic and high comfort levels over longer play sessions that the Cloud design has always offered. The inline controls are the only exception to that rule – they feel flimsy by comparison to the rest of the package. We recommend the Alpha over the Cloud II (only just) because of the better frequency response range.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Powerful but clear sound
- ⊕ Bombproof build quality
- ⊖ No detachable cable
- ⊖ Flimsy inline controls

SPECS WIRELESS: NO / **DRIVERS:** 50MM DUAL CHAMBER NEODYMIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** 3.5MM ANALOG / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 13HZ-27,000HZ / **FEATURES:** DETACHABLE NOISE-CANCELLING MIC, IN-LINE CABLE CONTROLS

Arctis Pro + GameDAC

STEELSERIES £250

The high-end gaming headset that does it all

2 High-res audio is on the up thanks to games such as *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* offering full support. The Arctis Pro GameDAC makes full use of that crystalline high-res sound with a 5Hz-40KHz frequency response range – a spec that also makes the drivers sound great for everyday compressed audio usage. So, if you're planning to use it for videos or music, this is definitely a great choice.

The GameDAC itself is a combination of a digital-to-analog converter that takes the strain away from your CPU, a preamp, and a control centre. With a press

of its button and a roll of the dial, DTS Headphone-X surround can be enabled or disabled, chat/game mix tweaked, and EQ settings perfected. The subtle ring around each earcup on these cans ticks the RGB box without ruining the overall aesthetic.

Our only reservations are that it requires an adapter for smartphone usage, and that its cables feel cheaper than a £250 headset should.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Tasteful RGB lighting
- ⊕ Handy GameDAC controls
- ⊖ Cables feel fragile
- ⊖ Slightly overpriced

SPECS WIRELESS: NO / **DRIVERS:** 40MM NEODYMIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB, OPTICAL, 3.5MM ANALOG / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 10HZ-40,000HZ / **FEATURES:** RETRACTABLE NOISE-CANCELLING MIC, DTS HEADPHONE:X 2.0, RGB

GROUP TEST

“THE SOUND QUALITY IS A CONSIDERABLE IMPROVEMENT FROM RAZER’S PHONIC ENDEAVOURS OF THE PAST”



3

Nari Ultimate

RAZER **£200**

The best Razer headset on the market

3 Haptic feedback in games is a polarising issue, but we have to applaud its first proper execution in a gaming headset. Showcasing the company’s new HyperSense technology, this headset – which feels like you’re wearing a pair of subwoofers on your head – is best experienced for yourself. It may be expensive, but it really is worth the money.

Since it features a wide gamut of haptic frequencies rather than just one static mode of vibration, the Nari Ultimate exhibits one of the most true-to-life rumble sensations we’ve ever experienced. And because

support for it isn’t programmed at the software level, every game is compatible. But it’s more than just haptics. The sound quality is a considerable improvement from Razer’s phonic endeavours of the past. Unlike the bass-heavy Kraken cans, this set adds a healthy balance of highs and mids to the mix as well. The wireless connection is a rock-solid one, and the overall comfort of the headset is excellent.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Haptic feedback works in its favour
- ⊕ Balanced sound quality
- ⊖ Limited wireless compatibility
- ⊖ No support for noise-cancelling

SPECS WIRELESS: YES / **DRIVERS:** 50MM NEODYMIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB WIRELESS, 3.5MM ANALOG / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20HZ-20,000HZ / **FEATURES:** RETRACTABLE MIC, THX SPATIAL AUDIO, COOLING GEL-INFUSED CUSHIONS, RGB

Arctis 9X

STEELSERIES **£180**

The best gaming headset for multiple platforms

4 In most cases, you’d be right to assume a console-specific headset would be trash on PC. An exception to this rule is the SteelSeries Arctis 9X, a self-proclaimed Xbox headset that works great on everything. You’ll need a Bluetooth dongle to use it wirelessly with your PC, unless your motherboard has it built in. But once you secure one of those, the Arctis 9X is a perfect fit for the platform agnostic.

All this functionality is made better by the promise of a 20-hour battery life which, in our testing, proved to be accurate. And because it uses the same

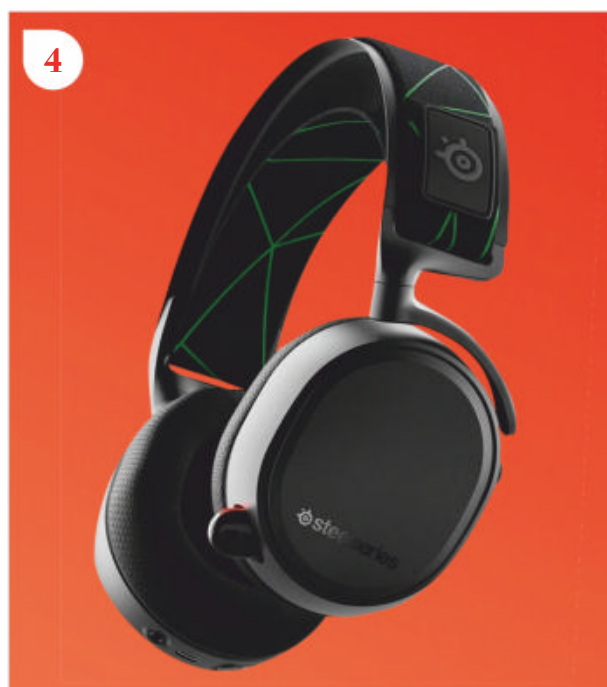
40mm drivers and nylon ear cushions as the company’s other acclaimed headsets, you can trust the SteelSeries Arctis 9X’s consistent sound quality and comfort.

Our one complaint is that while its creators flaunt its bespoke, portable design, none of us would be caught dead wearing these in public. Keep the flashy headband and retractable mics at home where they belong.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Works on PC, mobile and consoles
- ⊕ Top-notch comfort and sound
- ⊖ Ostentatious headband
- ⊖ Mic isn’t detachable

SPECS WIRELESS: YES / **DRIVERS:** 40MM NEODYMIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** XBOX WIRELESS, BLUETOOTH, 3.5MM ANALOG / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20HZ-22,000HZ / **FEATURES:** STEELENGINE 3, RETRACTABLE MIC, 20-HOUR BATTERY LIFE



Sound BlasterX H6

CREATIVE **£60**

A brilliant headset that can turn its hand to all media

5 Creative has busted out some quality products in recent times, and one of the best is the Sound BlasterX H6 headset. It's a mid-range, USB-connected headset that does everything pretty darn well.

It's got a stylish and pleasing design, based in black and metal – while the cups have an illuminating RGB circle on them – and it feels very solid and secure when you're wearing it. The thick-cushioned ear cups are a joy to wear, cutting out background noise just by their design, and overall it's easily passable as an everyday, all-media headset.

Inside, the 50mm drivers provide excellent audio, particularly for games. The quality of the sound, down to minute audio details, is excellent, and the surround sound is seamless. No matter what we played when we tested it, the H6 took in its stride and presented it beautifully. This extends to all other media types, and in its price range, it's one of the best we've ever tested.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Wonderful sound quality and depth
- ⊕ Brilliantly versatile
- ⊖ A little lacking in the mid-range
- ⊖ Mic range not extensive

SPECS WIRELESS: NO / **DRIVERS:** 50MM NEODYMIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB, 3.5MM ANALOG / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20HZ-20,000HZ / **FEATURES:** DETACHABLE MIC, DETACHABLE MESH EARCUPS, 7.1 VIRTUAL SURROUND SOUND, RGB

Arctis 7

STEELSERIES **£160**

The best wireless gaming headset for most users

6 What we like best about the Arctis 7 is that you can easily forget it's a wireless model while you're using it. There's none of the muddiness or audio artefacts that have historically ruined the party for wireless headsets – it sounds just as good as the best wired models we've tested at this price range. The battery life clocks in at over 20 hours out of the box, and after almost a year of heavy use that figure's hardly dropped. You can keep playing while you charge, too, by connecting it to your PC with a USB cable.

The Arctis range's distinctive ski goggle headband is really

effective at keeping the weight of the headset away from your head, and even after playing for hours we've never felt it digging in. The headband does slacken, which makes for a looser and slightly less comfortable fit, but the bands are replaceable and sold for under £15 on the Steelseries online store. A functional but slightly quiet and muffled mic is the only chink in its otherwise formidable armour.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Great battery life
- ⊕ Comfortable 'ski goggle' headband
- ⊖ Headband can slacken over time
- ⊖ Average mic

SPECS WIRELESS: YES / **DRIVERS:** 40MM NEODYMIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB WIRELESS, 3.5MM ANALOG / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20HZ-20,000HZ / **FEATURES:** RETRACTABLE NOISE CANCELLING MIC, DTS HEADPHONE:X, 7.1 SURROUND



IBM's newly opened IBM Quantum Computation Center in New York State has over 150,000 registered users and nearly 80 commercial clients.

IBM VS GOOGLE

Two giants of quantum computing slug it out, politely

This month we need to deal with a big concept: quantum supremacy. Not the story of a subatomic particle trained as the CIA's ultimate assassin but now suffering amnesia and uncovering a conspiracy. No, it's the idea that a quantum computer might be able to solve some task that a classical computer cannot, or at least couldn't do within the remaining lifespan of the universe.

Without this, you may ask, what's the point of spending billions on developing quantum computers? And that's a good point. The idea that quantum supremacy will one day happen, and that no calculation, no matter how complex, will be beyond us, is behind all the efforts to get one working. Quantum computing hinges on the idea that subatomic particles are weird, and that weirdness can be marshalled to do sums. Theoretically, a correctly configured quantum machine could do sums that ordinary computers would find impossible. Explanations for how it works vary from the idea that a calculation is being run in many parallel universes simultaneously, to the metaphor of ripples in a lake interfering with one another until only one possibility is left – which must be the answer. None of them are a satisfying explanation.

Unexpectedly, at the end of last year, a Google-backed team announced that it had achieved supremacy: carrying

out a computational task (checking the outputs from a quantum random-number generator) in 200 seconds that a classical supercomputer would take 10,000 years to complete. Google used a 53-qubit processor named Sycamore, and broke the news in a paper published in *Nature*, one of the world's top scientific journals and very much the PC Gamer of its field. The paper's 77 authors – including John M Martinis, Google's chief scientist for quantum hardware and a professor of experimental physics at the University of California – claim in the paper's abstract that they had achieved a “dramatic increase in speed compared to all known classical algorithms [and this] is an experimental realisation of quantum supremacy for this specific computational task, heralding a much-anticipated computing paradigm”.

QUANTUM LEAP

Whenever somebody is celebrating, however, someone else always likes to come along and pour cold water on the festivities, and this time that turned out to be IBM, no stranger to the quantum computer or, indeed, classical supercomputing. And rather than a ding-dong between robotic spokes-Als, the whole thing played out in the genteel language of the academic paper. Big Blue pointed to a different classical computing technique that could do the random-number-checking in two days “and with far greater fidelity. This is in fact a conservative, worst-case estimate, and



Quantum bits

If a qubit can be kept isolated from its environment it can go into superposition, a state of both 1 and 0 at the same time. This is what supplies the advantage over classical digital computers. This can be used to calculate across several qubits, but as soon as the qubit is read, the superposition collapses to an answer of either 1 or 0 again.

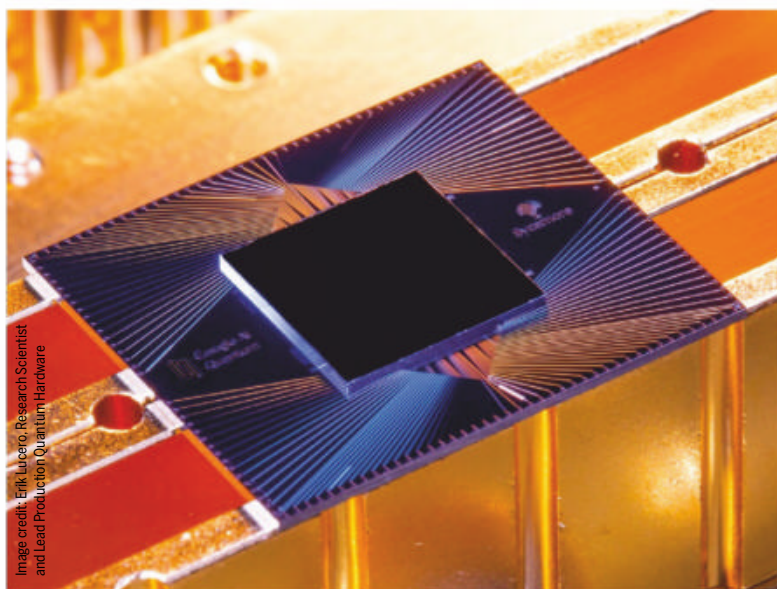


Image credit: Erik Lucero, Research Scientist and Lead Production Quantum Hardware



Image credit: Carlos Jones ORNL

FAR LEFT: The Sycamore chip itself.

LEFT: IBM and NVidia's Summit supercomputer, at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Tennessee, was used by Google to check its results and estimate how long a classical supercomputer would take to do the same calculations.

QUANTUM USES *What could we use quantum computers for?*

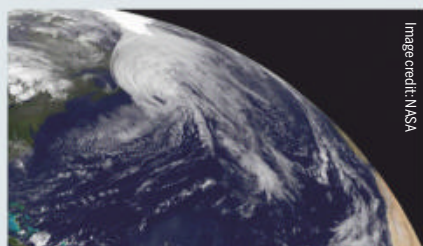
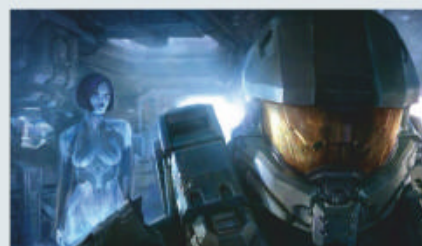


Image credit: NASA

1 WEATHER FORECASTING Carried out on supercomputers, predicting the weather requires the analysis of huge datasets. Quantum computers could also help build more accurate climate models.



2 DRUG DEVELOPMENT Studying the interactions between molecules is key to discovering new drugs. With a number of combinations still to be analysed, quantum computers could speed things up immensely.



3 AI The quantum processor's ability to analyse large amounts of data quickly will be key to AI development. Shortening the time it takes AI systems to learn will speed their deployment.



Image credit: p xabay

4 ONLINE SECURITY If quantum computers could render our encryption algorithms useless, they can also replace them with quantum encryption methods based on quantum entanglement.

we expect that with additional refinements, the classical cost of the simulation can be further reduced”.

Google's 200 seconds claim is still faster, but it's not the complete owning that was initially reported. More of a quantum advantage than full supremacy.

In a blog post credited to four writers including Jay Gambetta, the company's vice president of quantum computing, IBM quoted John Preskill, professor of theoretical physics at Caltech who coined the term 'quantum supremacy' in 2012. "It won't change anything overnight, but it is significant that quantum computers are now at the stage that at least in some arena, they can outperform the best computers on Earth." IBM went on to praise Google's achievement, saying, "Google's experiment is an excellent demonstration of the progress in superconducting-based quantum computing, showing state-of-the-art gate fidelities on a 53-qubit device, but it should not be viewed as proof that quantum computers are 'supreme' over classical computers."

Preskill himself then jumped into the debate with a column in Quanta magazine, a publication that aims to aid the public understanding of a very complex subject and therefore very much the PC Gamer of quantum physics. In it, he discussed problems with the term 'quantum supremacy' itself, before congratulating the Google team on its achievement and pointing out the main issue, "The catch, as the Google team acknowledges, is that the problem their machine solved with astounding speed was carefully chosen just for the purpose of demonstrating the quantum computer's superiority.

GOOGLE COULD HAVE USED SYCAMORE TO FACTOR A COUPLE OF ENORMOUS PRIME NUMBERS

"It is not otherwise a problem of much practical interest. In brief, the quantum computer executed a randomly chosen sequence of instructions, and then all the qubits were measured to produce an output bit string. This quantum computation has very little structure, which makes it harder for the classical computer to keep up, but also means that the answer is not very informative."

So if quantum supremacy has been achieved, it's only in a way that doesn't benefit us much – although streams of random numbers do have applications in areas such as gambling, cryptography, and anywhere that unpredictable results are desired. The possibilities, however, are endless.

Google could have used Sycamore to factor a couple of enormous prime numbers, which would have the same effect on the RSA encryption e-commerce depends upon in the same way that a tin opener does on a can of beans. It could have identified

a room-temperature superconductor, paving the way for breakthroughs as quantum processors would no longer need to be cooled to a few degrees above absolute zero to work.

Quantum computers should also be good at solving optimisation problems, balancing cost and utility in areas such as telecoms infrastructure, road planning, and games of *Spacechem*. So while we shouldn't be expecting quantum AI minds to start controlling our post-scarcity interplanetary society just yet, once quantum supremacy is fully here, and scientists start moving across to quantum computers to carry out tasks, things will start to get very interesting. ■

Ian Evenden

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,072

MOTHERBOARD		B360M-HDV ASRock £63 ASRock's B360M board definitely qualifies as 'no frills', but it'll still get the juice out of your CPU without bottlenecks.
PROCESSOR		Core i3-9100f Intel £70 An incredibly nippy quad-core CPU for the price, Intel's 9th gen budget chip skips integrated graphics for affordability.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 GAMING EVGA £320 Compact, great value, and part of NVIDIA's latest GPU generation, this EVGA model is the budget gamer's best friend.
COOLER		Hyper 212 Evo CoolerMaster £25 Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB Corsair £57 16GB of RAM gives you plenty of breathing room when running multiple programs, and Corsair's selling this kit cheap.
POWER SUPPLY		CX-M Series CX550M Corsair £55 A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £50 Crucial's SSD range is fantastic value and offers good performance, too. A 250GB drive can hold your OS and essential programs.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £34 One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games.
CASE		Neos Bitfenix £36 The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.
DISPLAY		Optix MAG271C MSI £239 MSI packs huge value into this. You will have to start blaming your k:d on your broadband instead of your refresh rate though.
KEYBOARD		BlackWidow Lite Razer £65 Silent and deadly as its namesake, this BlackWidow board from Razer is a joy to type on. No number pad though, be warned.
MOUSE		Rival 110 SteelSeries £30 A great sensor, simple design and impressively low price make this a great entry-level gaming mouse.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £28 Deceptively luxurious for the price, Corsair's budget cans offer comfort and powerful low-end. Also colours. Very bright colours.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,631

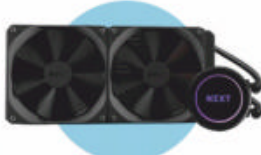
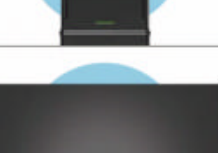
MOTHERBOARD		X470 PRIME X470-PRO Asus £132 Tasteful RGB (if that's your thing) and substantial heatsinks make this a fine base for any AMD build.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 3800X AMD £289 Once our top-end pick, AMD's Ryzen 7 is still as formidable but now realistic for mid-range builds, too. What a time to be alive.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan Zotac £320 Serious power from the 'just about affordable' end of Nvidia's new GPU fleet, and it's ray tracing-ready too.
COOLER		Hydro Series H55 Quiet Edition Corsair £55 Tidy and quiet, the H55 will unlock our CPU's overclocking potential and look good through your case window while it does so.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666 Corsair £67 16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.
POWER SUPPLY		CX 650W Corsair £62 It may not feature fancy modular design, but Corsair's reliable CX 650 is cheap enough to accommodate for our other part picks.
SSD		Evo 860 250GB Samsung £50 Samsung's Evo series has long been a stalwart of nippy r/w speeds and reliability, and this 250GB drive is very affordable.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £34 SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £73 The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.
DISPLAY		Predator XB271H Acer £330 G-Sync and up to 180Hz of overclocked refresh rate – Acer's 27-inch Predator is quicker than a S1mple AWP peek.
KEYBOARD		One Ducky £100 A lesser known keyboard brand with a great rep among mechanical switch nerds. Ducky delivers the goods with the One.
MOUSE		Model O Minus Glorious £45 The lightest gaming mouse in production and one of the most responsive and comfortable out there. Look at those holes!
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £74 Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,866

MOTHERBOARD		ROG Maximus XI Code Asus £350 Immense overclocking potential, and a look that's barely even recognisable as a motherboard. Space-age PCB tech.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 9900K Intel £480 Intel's new 5.0GHz, 8-core monster rules the roost in the CPU market. And it comes in a fancy nine-sided box too, so there's that.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2080Ti Black Edition EVGA £1,049 EVGA's custom design is considerably cheaper than Nvidia's reference card, and with great cooling.
COOLER		Kraken X62 NZXT £126 The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.
MEMORY		Ripjaws V 32GB @3200 G.Skill £106 G.Skill is always a safe bet for lightning fast RAM, and if you can do without the RGB frills this 2x16GB set will treat you right.
POWER SUPPLY		HX750i 80 Plus Platinum Corsair £148 Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.
SSD		XPG SX8200 Pro 1TB ADATA £120 A whole terabyte of M.2 storage with blistering read/write speeds, just waiting to be filled with Steam games you'll never play.
HDD		WD Blue 4TB Western Digital £87 With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.
CASE		Enthoo Evolv ATX TG Phanteks £135 The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.
DISPLAY		AW3418DW Alienware £840 34 inches of curved, beautifully presented 120Hz display with the added benefits of G-Sync. One for aesthetes and athletes alike.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £160 Those low-profile keys feel like taking your fingers figure-skating. It's wireless too, so that's the cable jam dragon slain.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £95 The Lightspeed is the very latest edition of Logi's loveable G502, and while it might look familiar nearly all internal parts are new.
HEADSET		Virtuoso RGB Corsair £170 Featuring some of the fanciest RGB implementation we've ever seen, Corsair's new luxury cans befit a top-end build nicely.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

Hey, a spider's gotta eat.



“I’ll revel in watching a spider bite my head off, as long as they’ve earned it”

LAST YEAR gets closer to emulating a slasher movie than most

I didn’t belong to any particular clique in school, but *Last Year* lets me live out that – now that I’m saying it out loud – pretty abnormal fantasy. But it also punishes me for wanting to in the first place, often by A) feeding me to a large spider B) placing my skull between the large, meaty fists of a giant, or C) uh, well, hooks. So, so many hooks.

Yeah, it’s another asymmetrical monsters vs men game, but *Last Year* doesn’t just copy *Dead by Daylight* or *Left 4 Dead*. It takes the conceit, a genre all its own at this point, and makes the monster an offensive level editor with a messed up suit and the teens focused, class-oriented (get it?

JAMES DAVENPORT



THIS MONTH
I role-played the cruel jock so when I die no one’s mad.

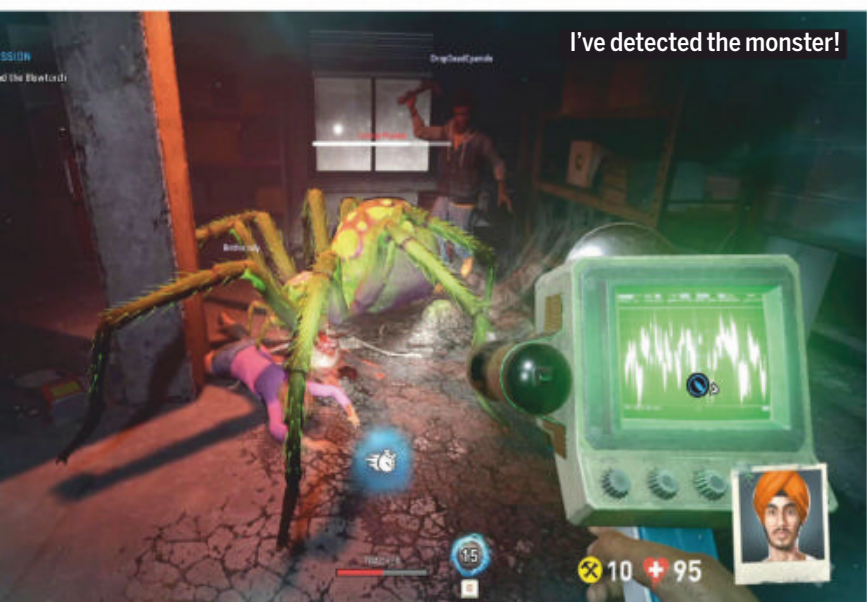
ALSO PLAYED
Tyranny, Life is Strange 2

Because school!) teammates. To be even more reductive, it’s a light level editor (monster) against five fragile testers (teens).

Here’s what I mean: each match, five teen survivors, each their own horror movie cliché, picks a class and sets out into the level with a few typical horror movie objectives, like finding batteries to start a generator that opens a door and lets them escape. The four classes make up a

team composition that, together, can foresee and repel any cleverly placed trap or monster attack. The scout can ping traps and tell if the monster is close, while the medic and assault classes work... well, pretty much how you’d expect. Crafting materials are strewn about the level, often in precarious people-separating places, that allow players to make crucial items and weapons: hockey sticks, smoke bombs, flamethrowers, that sort of thing. It’s that *Left 4 Dead* item management team meta, but

**ALL THE ADDED COMPLEXITY
MAKES IT A NECESSITY TO
PLAY WITH FRIENDS**



deeper and wider and much more dependent on successful team coordination.

The monster (there are four types now, with the spider the newest addition) gets to play a demigod in order to even the odds against a team of five potentially well-equipped and communicative teens. As long as the monster isn't in anyone's line of sight, it can despawn into something called Predator Mode. From this invisible no-clip adjacent overview, they can do horror movie stuff.

MONSTER MASHED

All that complexity makes it a necessity to play with friends, or at least communicative players on the same page. Any gap in the teen teamwork is easily exploited by the monster. It doesn't help that there's no tutorial to teach survivors how to work with one another either. Every third match with randos ends in the first few minutes because no one has a clue what's going on.

But when it works, *Last Year* brushes up closer to the feeling of being in a slasher flick than any other game of its type. Pounding synth-driven music and the ambience of whimpering teens help nail the oppressive atmosphere. It all works well enough that I still revel in watching a spider bite my head off – as long as they've earned it. ■



“There’s only one rule that kids follow”

The joys of getting messy in **CARDPOCALYPSE**

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
A bigger kid stole my lunch money.

ALSO PLAYED
Darksiders II, *Warhammer Underworlds: Online*

For players of a certain age, there's an easy nostalgia to *Cardpocalypse's* premise. You play a kid at a school where everyone's obsessed with a collectable card game starring weird, animal-like monsters – in other words, a throwback to *Pokemon's* utter domination of the playground zeitgeist in the late-90s.

But that set-up serves to do more than just evoke happy memories. By presenting its 'Power Pets' card battles from the perspective of a group of enthusiastic kids, it gives itself permission to be messy. Children don't spend their time worrying about balance in games, or finding the most precise, efficient combos. They don't religiously follow the rules, or pore over FAQs online for the latest tweaks.

There's only one rule that kids follow: the rule of cool. Especially in the period in which the game is set, the community that defined that rule wasn't a global one, it was local. What was fair play and what wasn't, what

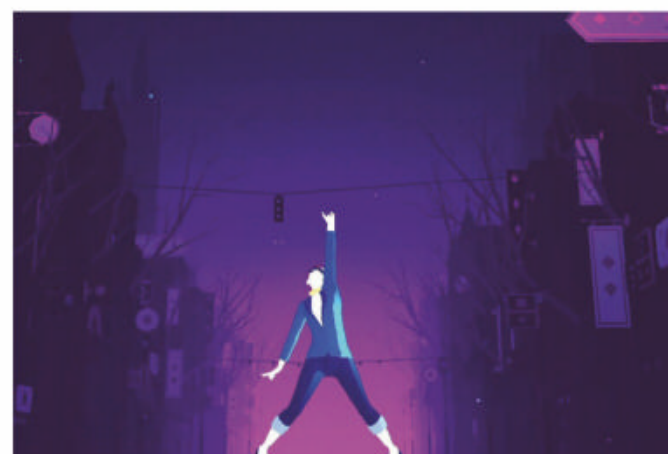
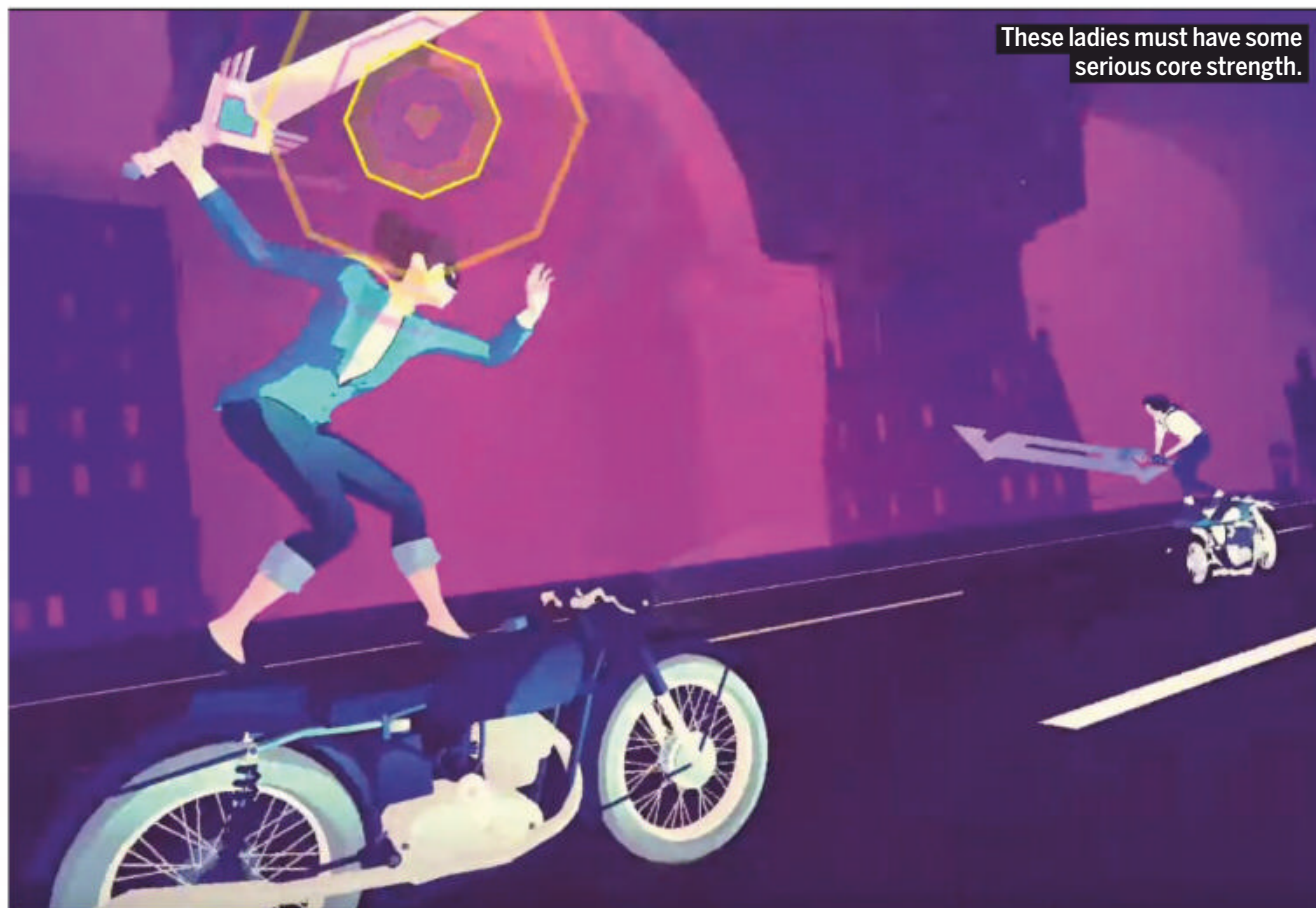
made sense and what didn't, it was up to you and your friends.

CHILD'S PLAY

And so it is in *Cardpocalypse*. The kids at protagonist Jess' school love playing Power Pets, but even more so they love making it their own. They trade not just in cards, but in stickers – it's agreed that you can stick new numbers over your favourite pet's stats to buff them, and even give them a new name. Thanks to an article in the official magazine, it's also considered kosher to create your own new cards from scratch, as long as you can do a convincing enough crayon drawing to illustrate it.

Cards are coveted, but not hoarded in pursuit of a complete collection. Instead they constantly change hands – traded back and forth, used as currency, borrowed, stolen. If you want a particular card, you've got to find a kid who's got it, and give him something he wants. Maybe that's a card of equivalent rarity – but, equally, maybe it's just a fistful of chocolate bars.

I love a deep and straight-faced strategy game as much as the next PC gaming magazine editor, but there's something wonderfully freeing about *Cardpocalypse's* anarchic approach. It conjures up nostalgia not just for a particular time and place, but for an entirely different attitude to gaming – one based in youthful curiosity and wonder. We could all do with a little more of that in our lives, eh? ■



“Fluid ballet movements are always the thing to carry you through”

SAYONARA WILD HEARTS is en pointe with its speedy transitions

I'm so glad this gorgeous indie made the leap from consoles, travelled full speed through cyberspace, and skidded to a timely halt on Steam. It's a rhythm action game about fast bikes, giant swords, lost loves, and magical girl transformations. It's free-spirited and energetic, and its pop soundtrack buzzes with energy.

On paper it sounds like a lot to keep up with, but *Sayonara Wild Hearts* is great at tying all of its ideas together neatly and coherently. In this universe, contemporary ballet is a rather more action-packed practice than it is in ours, and the game uses the grace of ballet choreography to create seamless transitions and a thematic throughline to its setpieces. The result is masterfully smooth, speedy gameplay that doesn't give you whiplash.

The story follows a young woman who has had her heart broken, and goes on a journey to accept herself and learn to love again. As part of her journey, she must chase down and defeat a number of bosses in a vibrant dreamscape of pinks, purples and blues. After a gentle tutorial that uses

▶ RACHEL WATTS



THIS MONTH
Pirouetted off the back of a motorbike.

ALSO PLAYED
Al: The Somnium Files,
GTFO

Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, a song that many ballet dancers have performed, you're launched into the action.

All of the levels from *Sayonara Wild Hearts*' repertoire have multiple different game modes, and it switches between them without breaking pace. One moment you're dodging incoming enemy missiles, then suddenly you'll be challenged with some rhythm QTEs, and in another moment you'll leap off the back of your bike and straight into a duel.

It's dazzling and spectacular, like something you would see in a *Cirque du Soleil* performance, and *Sayonara Wild Hearts* never leaves you behind. There's a constant rush of landscapes,

items and colours – but the game takes it all in its perfectly choreographed stride. Your character's fluid ballet movements are always the thing to carry you smoothly through from one sequence to the next.

FIRST POSITION

In one scene, she's gracefully pirouetting out of the way of enemy attacks while leaping effortlessly and the camera follows her movements. She doesn't just jump out of the way, she leaps and flips with elegance and poise. As she spins out of the way of the last threat, she spins to land back on her already moving motorbike and speeds away, already in position for the next sequence. It's all in one elegantly smooth motion, and this transition makes the movement between the different sequences as fluid as possible.

There's no need for the game to pause and adjust, it just carries the player through to the next section in a rush of excitement. *Sayonara Wild Hearts*' love of ballet means that it doesn't have to put the breaks on its speedy visuals. Its burst of ideas and expression all flows together through its fluid transitions, meaning you're never left behind. ■

LIKE SOMETHING YOU WOULD SEE IN A CIRQUE DU SOLEIL PERFORMANCE

“I’m loathe to even pick up my sword if I’m not getting paid for it”

Getting tossed a coin in **THE WITCHER 3**

It’s been weeks since I watched Netflix’s *The Witcher*, and I still can’t get Jaskier’s ‘Toss a Coin to Your Witcher’ out of my head. His fantasy banger echoes through me, haunting my every waking moment. So in an attempt to break the spell he’s clearly cast on me, I decide to do as he says, returning to *The Continent* to help Geralt earn a little extra pocket money.

The only problem there is that my version of Geralt is currently chilling out in sunny Toussaint in the gardens of his fully refurbished vineyard. That doesn’t sound like the down-on-his-luck monster hunter from Jaskier’s song, so I load up an earlier save and find a dishevelled and impoverished Witcher standing miserably in the rain beside a lake in Velen instead. Much better.

With little more than a handful of Orens to my name, I head towards a nearby village. When I arrive, I head straight for the noticeboard, and discover that the only Witcher contract available concerns someone called Jenny of the Woods. I ask the village’s leader about her, and

ALISTAIR JONES



THIS MONTH
Succumbed to Netflix’s catchiest new tune.

ALSO PLAYED
Teamfight Tactics, *Temtem*

negotiate my (substantial) fee. He’s not happy, but I’m not about to let Jaskier get the better of me. I head off to find Jenny, but soon discover that she’s met an untimely end and transformed into a horrible – and very angry – Nightwraith. I quickly find out that I’m comically under-levelled for the ensuing fight, but I eventually vanquish Jenny and collect my reward.

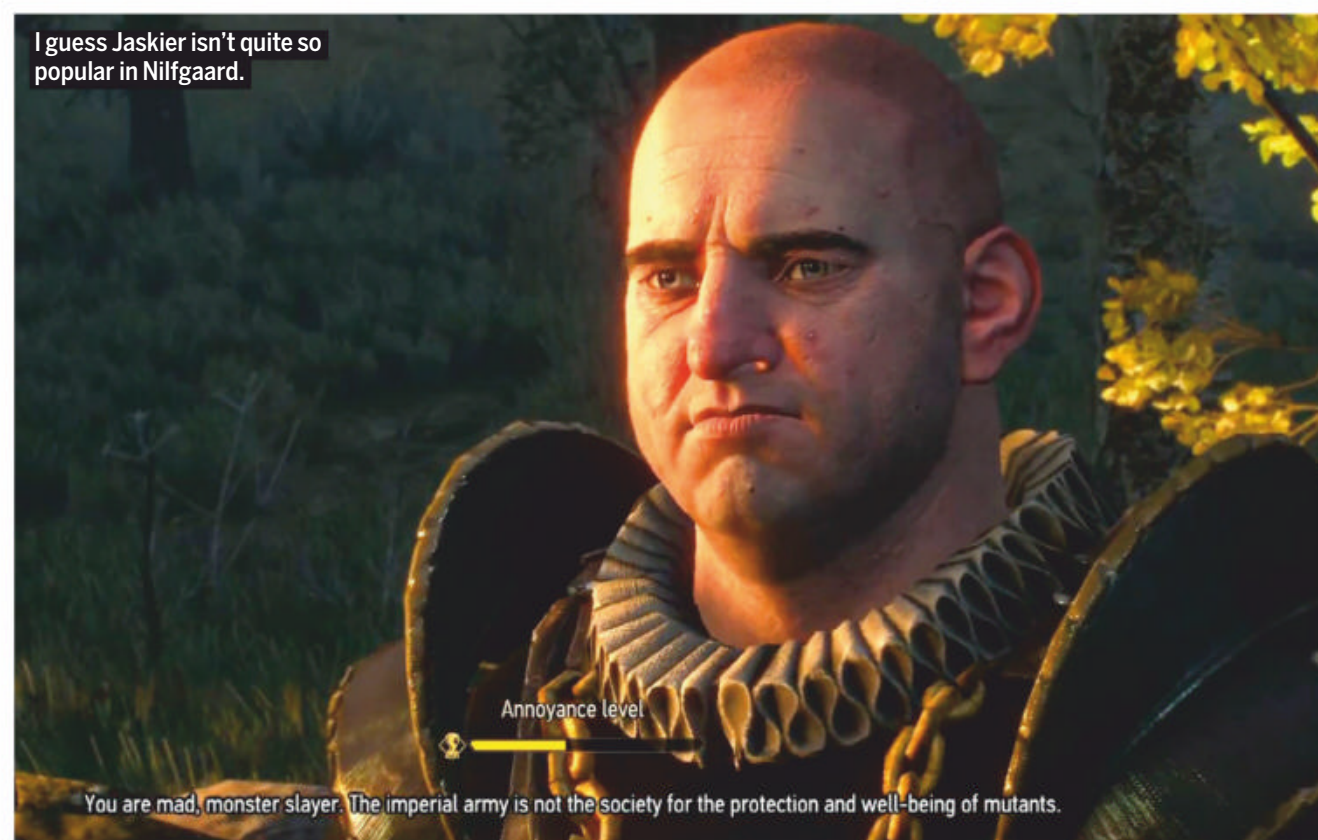
As I head out of the village, I’m ambushed by a band of deserters. As much as I’m loathe to even pick up my sword if I’m not getting paid for it, they’re a tenacious bunch, and I’m forced to fight them off. To ensure I

don’t come away empty handed, I pick their corpses clean and sell everything to a conveniently-placed travelling merchant. With a few more coins clinking in my pockets, I head off in search of my next contract.

O’ VALLEY OF PLENTY

I don’t have to go far. Just outside a nearby fishing village, I find a Nilfgaardian captain searching for a missing patrol. He thinks monsters are to blame, but then gets upset when I try and charge him nearly double the going rate to deal with them. I’m forced to accept his paltry offering and head off in search of the soldiers, but I can’t help but feel short-changed. Arriving at the patrol’s last known location, I find a band of ghouls. Thinking that this might be a chance for a quick buck after all, I head into battle, but discover to my horror that these corpse-eaters are so powerful that the game’s UI won’t even tell me how strong they are. I manage a few minutes of frantic dodging, but Geralt is eventually torn apart, and I find myself back where I started. Stuff this – I reckon I’ll have better luck convincing people to toss a coin to their Gwent opponent instead. ■

I QUICKLY FIND OUT THAT I’M COMICALLY UNDER-LEVELLED FOR THE ENSUING FIGHT





STARDEW VALLEY

The v1.4 update adds fish, fashion, and more. *By Rachel Watts*

Pelican Town and its residents have been spruced up, modified, and refreshed in *Stardew Valley's* v1.4 update. It's one of the biggest patches since the wholesome farming RPG first released – it includes 60 new items, over 200 pieces of clothing, new character events, hairstyles, farm buildings, a whole host of quality of life improvements, and hundreds of bug fixes. The total catalogue of additions supplied by developer ConcernedApe is hundreds of bullet points long. It's a huge overhaul of farming and community features that completely refreshes the relaxing farming simulator, even for seasoned players.

The *Stardew* experience has completely changed since back in 2016. The character creator screen has a bunch of new options, such as being able to wear dresses, shorts, and skirts, and you're now able to pick from 24 new hairstyles. There are more cats and dogs to adopt too, and they're all really cute, making your starting pet choice that much more difficult. There's even a new starting farm map, Four Corners Farm, divided into four separate quadrants – which makes it perfect for multiplayer.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE February 28, 2016	DEVELOPER ConcernedApe
PUBLISHER In-house	LINK stardewvalley.net

If you don't mind your farm getting a bit waterlogged, it's also time to make some space for two of the update's biggest features: fish ponds and rice shoots. Building a fish pond will give you the ability to hold and raise fish – with the right species at your disposal, you can harvest caviar, roe, and squid ink. Getting the fish to multiply is a bit tricky, though, because you'll need to fulfil the pond's population request, which involves feeding the fish specific items. For example, the blobfish, who is super fussy, will only multiply when you feed it three coral, two frozen tears, and two sea urchins – but then, that's a small sacrifice to make to get my own gooey army.

PONDS AND PADDIES

Rice shoots are a little bit different than normal crops in *Stardew*. They can be bought from Pierre's shop in the spring, and when planted they take eight days to grow. However, if you plant them near a water source like one of your farm's natural ponds, then you'll create a rice paddy – that lets them grow in six days, and you don't have to water them. Don't gift

your harvest to any of your community cuties, because no one in Pelican Town likes getting unmilled rice as a present. But turn it into rice pudding, and it'll go down a treat.

FARM FASHIONISTA

The v1.4 update also has a brand new feature that lets players tailor and dye clothing items – this is the thing that I've spent most of my time experimenting and messing around with. There's now a sewing machine in Emily and Hayley's house that lets you make clothing items from cloth combined with an item of your choice. Any resource can be added to the spool of the machine – and I do mean anything. My sauce-stained shirt, made by sticking some spaghetti in, is proof of that.

Messing around with the machine by feeding it different items is a highlight of v1.4. And as a bonus, it also lets you transfer the stats of

IF YOU MAKE IT INTO A RICE PUDDING IT WILL GO DOWN A TREAT

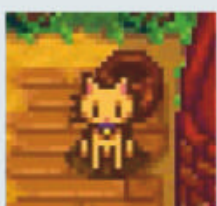
footwear from one pair to another. The original item will be consumed, but now your once flimsy trainers have +4 defence and +4 immunity.

You can dye items of clothing you're wearing using the dye pots to the right of the sewing machine. If you place one item of each colour into the pots, you'll create a magical rainbow dye that will add more options to the colour slider, finally allowing me to match the colour of my shirt to the exact shade of purple as my space boots.

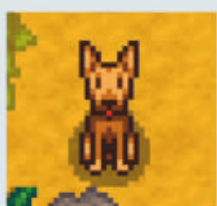
The v1.4 update is like a refreshing breeze that has swept through *Stardew Valley* and it's reignited my passion for the relaxing farming sim. There's so much to do. Every spouse now has 14-heart events, there's a new endgame mystery where you investigate an abandoned building, and there's a flute playing Trash Bear who cleans up Pelican Town's beach when you feed him.

The update is a great excuse to return to *Stardew* – I need to start working towards a thriving rice paddy, give my whole wardrobe a complete overhaul, and get breeding my blobfish armada... ■

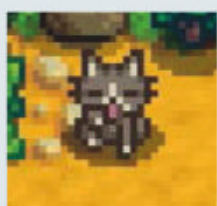
PET PARADE *Just a few of the new cuddly cats and canines you can adopt in v1.4*



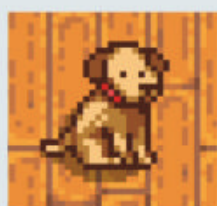
1 I adopted this cheeky chap and named him Sandy. It's an Attack of the Clones reference...



2 Look at the ears on the German Shepherd! He's confirmed to be a good boy.



3 Some stripes transform this cat into a cute tabby. Let's call him Munkustrap.

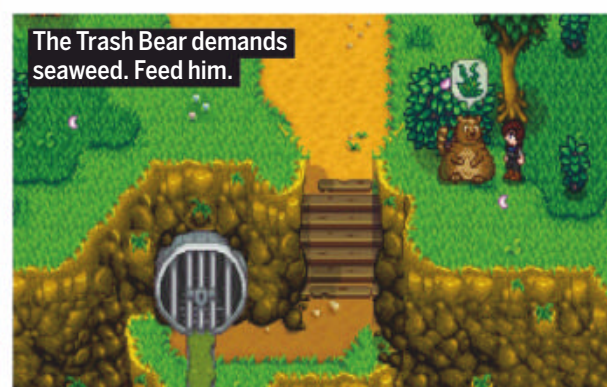


4 Soft, round ears make this pooch perfect for petting. So give him a forever home.

See different sides of the community with new character events.



The character creator has a host of new options.



Rice shoots are part of the spring seed collection.



TACKLE YOUR BACKLOG

Shrink your unplayed gaming fatberg and luxuriate in disk space. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Medium

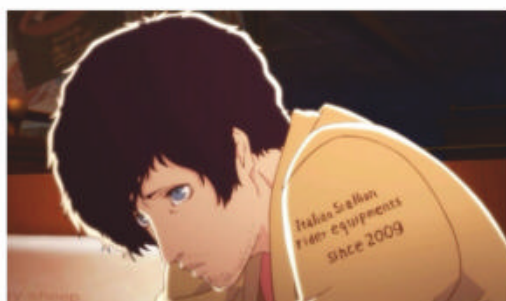
TIME
Depends on the size of your problem

VITAL LINKS

Dictionary definition:
bit.ly/372Lq1E

Andy K's pile of shame:
bit.ly/2Qk6NEQ

Best short games:
bit.ly/379X18D



GET REAL

1 I'm pretty sure acceptance is the first stage of something. Let's say it's admitting you have a pile of shame. Accept that there are too many games for anyone to play and that buying them all will only cause you stress.



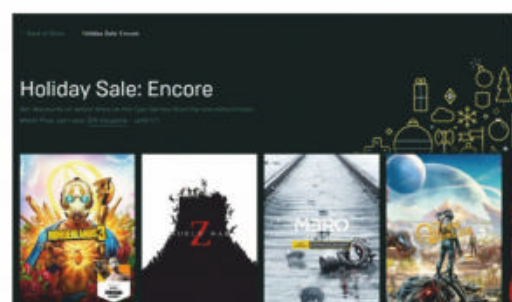
STOP THE WORLD

2 Not all games respect your time. Some demand a hundred hours before you see the credits, but few introduce enough new ideas to make each one fresh. If you're not invested in the story, duck out when things get paddy.



ACHIEVEMENT HUNTER

3 At best, achievements encourage you to sample different playstyles. At worst, they sap time that could be better spent on a new releases. Must you spend 14 hours getting Seven Day Survivor in the original *Dead Rising*? Really?



POINT OF SALE

4 Expanded your backlog with the recent festive sales? There's always scope for another New Year's rezzie: don't buy games you can't realistically play right now. That includes sequels to games you intend to finish, even if it's a great deal.



SERVICE, PLEASE!

5 Too many games want too much of your life nowadays. Be it *Destiny 2*, *FIFA*, or *Warframe*, pick your service game of choice and stick to it. That way you can clear your shame pile on the side.

OLD NEWS

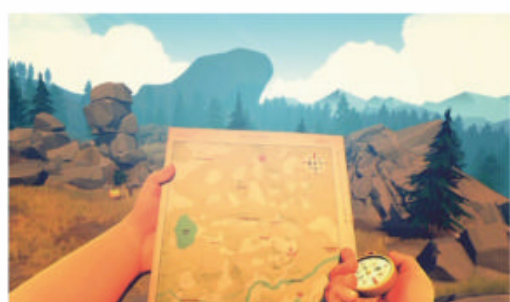
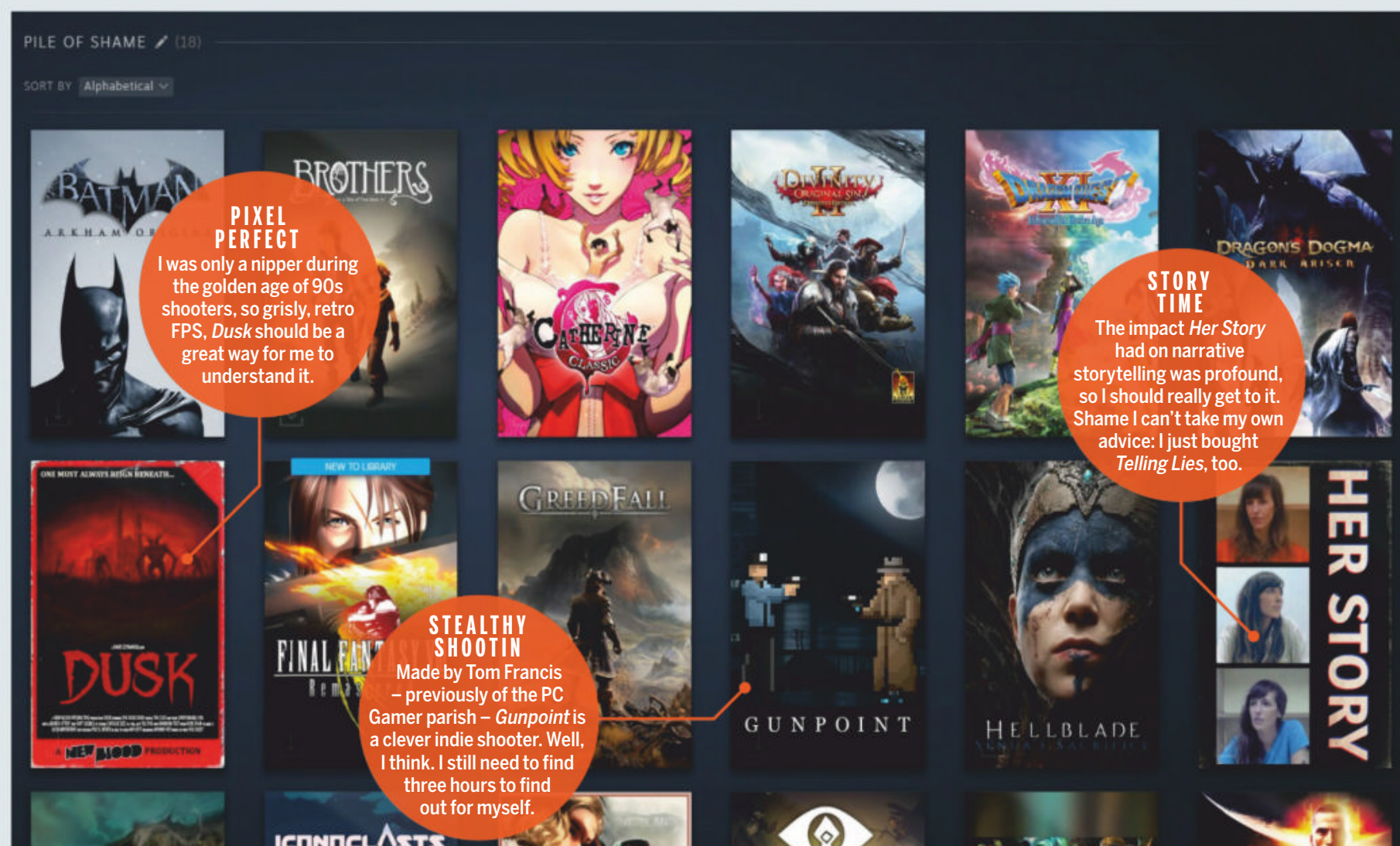
6 So you bought the original *Baldur's Gate* with the admirable intention to truly appreciate the PC gaming canon? Arguably some games are too old to enjoy on today's gaming rigs without mods.



GUT FEELING

7 We've all been there: the post Steam sale paralysis of not knowing what to play after securing many canny bargains. Forget the games you feel you should play, and get stuck into what you fancy – you'll get more done that way.

FOR SHAME *Three forgotten games I should tick off*



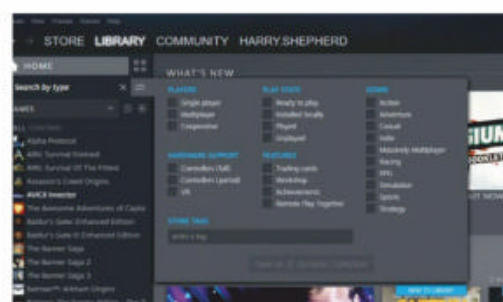
LESS IS MORE

8 Focus on the short games in your library. Longer games aren't always better – especially when you're blowing away the cobwebs from your backlog – and finishing games like *Journey* and *Firewatch* is a great way to make a little dent.



SINGLE-MINDED

9 It's tough to shake the temptation and feeling that you have to see everything in a game, but focus on finishing the main story. If you really like the game, you'll have the inclination to go back and clear the collectables you missed.



DYNAMIC COLLECTIONS

10 Wading through your Steam backlog was a chore, until now. Following Valve's September 2019 update, Dynamic Collections let you better organise your library. Do so by genre to help you get to the type of title you fancy quickly.



TOUR GUIDE

11 Don't agonise over difficult sequences, there's no shame in using guides to help you. Naturally there are many excellent guides on pcgamer.com and, as PC Gamer's Guides Editor, I can safely say there's zero conflict of interest here.



READ REVIEWS

12 Keep abreast of a game's coverage to help sort the diamonds from the duds. Find the reviewers that tend to align with you and avoid increasing your shame stack with games that aren't worth your time.



RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

RDR2's early mod scene shows promise. *By Lauren Morton*

It's still early days in *Red Dead Redemption 2* on PC but the prolific *GTA V* modding community has provided a solid foundation for *RDR2* modders to get started at a gallop. Thanks to the popularity of mods like *FiveM*'s custom servers and *LCPD* for *GTA V*, cowboy modders know not just how to get a jump on making similar mods for *RDR2*, but which will be in the highest demand.

The creators of the *FiveM* mod for *GTA V* announced the *RDR2* counterpart *RedM* was in development before the game even launched on PC. Similarly, the creator of the first fight club mod for *RDR2* on PC says that it's "quite simple compared to the fight club mods in *GTA V*." Although it may be just the first incarnation of fully-kitted fight club, they rightly say, "I suppose we all need to start somewhere."

Another early mod for *RDR2* is *They Keep Coming*, which turns all NPCs hostile for your own personal horde mode. I tried out both it and *Fight Club* to get a sense for how

the earliest days of *RDR2* modding are shaping up.

As with all mods for *RDR2*, Rockstar is only willing to look the other way if you stay out of multiplayer. For the forgetful among us, the *ScriptHook* mod that's a prerequisite for both *They Keep Coming* and *Fight Club* force-closes the game for you if you attempt to join a multiplayer session. Back up your save files before you start messing around as well.

ARTHUR'S PUNCH-OUT!!

I start off with *Fight Club*, figuring that I should practice fighting NPCs one-on-one before graduating to entire mobs. To date, I've still not finished even the prologue of *Red*



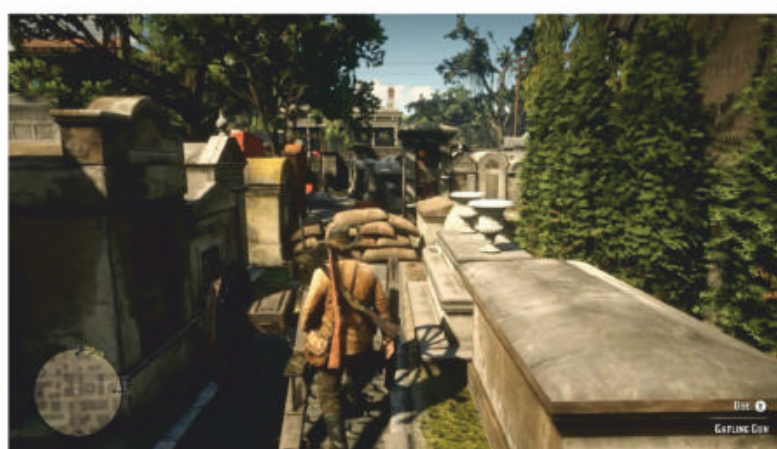
I HORSE MY WAY UP TO TOWN TO SCOUT A GOOD LOCATION FOR AN INAUGURAL FIGHT

Dead Redemption 2's story, opting instead to exist entirely in its multiplayer mode.

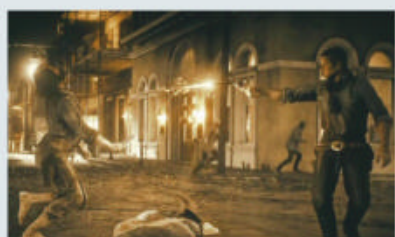
The save file 'mod' I chose to borrow from Nexus Mods starts me out just south of Valentine, so I horse my way up to town to scout a good location for an inaugural fight. *Fight Club*'s mod page gives the helpful suggestion that a bar might be a good location for a brawl.

When I rode into Valentine though it wasn't the saloon that caught my eye, but the proud white spire of the local church. That will be my temple of fists, I am sure.

The front doors are locked, I quickly find when I bash Arthur's shoulder into them with no effect. I decide that the cemetery outside will do just as well. The graves of fallen



MOD WATCH *In development mods for RDR2*



UNDEAD NIGHTMARE

Inspired by the first *Red Dead Redemption*'s *Undead Nightmare* DLC, modder JediJosh is working on a proper zombie expansion for *RDR2*. This is one to keep an eye on as a contender for custom servers.



RDRFR

Based on the *GTA V* *LCPDRF* that allows players to take on the role of local police, *RDRFR* is in alpha stage. This one will likely be a key component to roleplay servers that let players take on specific jobs.



REDM

RedM is a framework for creating custom servers not bound by Rockstar's modding rules. This will be the lynchpin that other great mods turn on, giving many a place for players to experiment.

» cowpokes and others even form a convenient fighting ring.

I press F1 to open *Fight Club*'s menu and the number pad to navigate through its selection of opponents. My main categories are young, middle, and old, separated by male or female characters. It only seems sporting that Arthur should start off with someone in the 'malemiddle' category. Fight someone my own size, as they say.

My first victim is 'btchillbilly'. A man in a white shirt and cutoff jeans drops in and takes a swing at Arthur's jaw before I can finish closing *Fight Club*'s menu. That's when I realise I have no idea how to fistfight in *RDR2*. All of my *Red Dead Online* harassment techniques involve hogtying my friends but I'm far too civilised to take a swing at them.

I quickly figure out how to block and punch and if there's more nuance to *Red Dead*'s fistfights I don't need them to take down this hick. I punch his hat right off his face and a few more after that his rear is in the dirt. I take his hat as a trophy after I accidentally *Fight Club* him to death. Thanks to the mod, I don't suffer any reputation loss for my conquest.

Without moving the hillbilly's body, I go digging for my second opponent. I try the young male category and settle for 'newspaperboy'. If he's old enough for a job, he's old enough to throw a punch. I spawn six paper boys, attempting to make it a fair fight. One of them decks me and the other five all shuffle away confused.

KIDS ARE STUPID

I try to at least put down the one paper boy except it turns out that despite his distinctly young-adult stature he's protected by his 'young' status. I can't throw a punch back. He swings for my face again and again. My vision starts getting blurry. "Any last words, old man?" he taunts. In a last ditch attempt to defend myself from this hooligan I pull out my knife. I can't swing it at him any more than I can my fist but apparently he's not aware because he runs away begging for his life. We'll chalk that up as a second win.

I go a bit wild on my third choice. I dig into the female middle category and queue up 'sdupperclass' which I assume will be a fancy lady from Saint Denis. Sure enough, the woman that drops into my graveyard has a frilly shirt, a feathered hat and berates me in French. I quickly fumble for my lasso. My misplaced sense of honour demands I hogtie her instead of punch her. Before I can

make heads or tails of the situation she's punched me seven times and knocked me stone cold dead.

Apparently no one ever told her standard *Fight Club* rules, because when I wake up on the opposite side of town she's running towards me like a French banshee and attempts to murder me a second time.

This time I do manage to hogtie her but I've forgotten to turn on *Fight Club*'s 'never wanted' setting so the horse police, in flagrant disrespect for the sanctity of my graveyard punch club, gun me down while fleeing with the upper class lady over my shoulder. Well, that's enough of that.

HORDECORE DIFFICULTY

The *Fight Club* mod is good for a few laughs but in its early form I can't



I PUNCH HIS HAT RIGHT OFF HIS FACE AND A FEW MORE AFTER THAT HIS REAR IS IN THE DIRT

imagine many uses for it. *They Keep Coming*, on the other hand, I have a specific plan for. I play with an Xbox One controller on PC and despite the aim assist built in for controller players, I'm notorious for aiming down my sights, flicking the analog stick up for a head shot, and shooting someone's hat off while missing their dome by literal hairs.

Like holing up in El Presidio in the first *Red Dead Redemption* and fighting off the law, I hope that being penned in to the Saint Denis cemetery will function like shooting gallery training. *They Keep Coming* warns that the mob of townsfolk begins at the west gate so I find a hiding spot behind a giant headstone and queue up the attack.

The villagers bust through the gate and swarm towards my location almost before I can react. I get off a couple shots from my Springfield Rifle before multiple pistol-packing dudes are up in my face. I survive an impressive 34 seconds and net two kills. The Springfield was a bad choice, of course. The reload time is too long. I swap to the Lancaster Repeater – another of the basic weapons gifted by a cheat code because, again, I've made no singleplayer progress myself – and find a better hiding spot. Twenty-seven seconds and four kills.

I jump into the configurable file for *They Keep Coming* and turn the max number of enemies down from

70 to just 10. I need a bit less horde and a bit more duck hunt. At that point I also dig into the menu of traps that the mod allows for. There are cover objects to place, exploding crates and barrels, gatling guns and cannons. I set up a few exploding crates at the west gate, a sandbag wall for cover down the main walking path, and a gatling gun behind it for when things get dire.

I start the horde and – wait, are they all sprinting past the western gate? I aim down my repeater sights to get a better look and, yes, they absolutely are. Is it because I placed the explosive crate too close to the gate and they can't open it?

I never get an answer because the horde rushes in from my unguarded left side, having found the southern entrance. Forty-eight seconds and three kills.

My successive attempts are equally ill-fated but in stubbornness I keep trying new configurations and strategies. Despite my ACME-level inability to successfully deploy traps, I do notice my headshot accuracy getting just a bit better, even if I still haven't lasted a full minute.

Fight Club and *They Keep Coming* are both early mods for *Red Dead Redemption 2* with a clear path to grow. Although their entertainment value will inevitably wane when you're playing alone, it's easy to imagine pairing either with the eventual launch of custom *RedM* servers to play with other people.

Even in its fledgling state, *RDR2* modders are building on proven mods from the *GTA V* community, headed for more robust creations in the not-so-distant future. ■

MADAME MAULER

Anatomy of a Saint Denis lady



1 Fists of steel moulded by the governess' knuckle slappings.

2 Speaking French to bewilder opponents.

3 Large skirt most likely for hiding numerous knives.

4 A frilly shirt to cover the tattoos for every cowboy she's killed.

5 A feathered hat, because murder can still be fashionable.



Technically I shouldn't even be telling you about *Fight Club*.

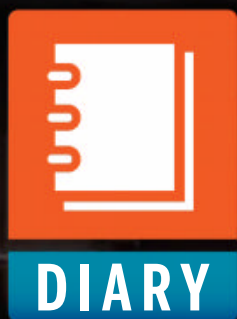


They just keep coming in *They Keep Coming*.



9186 ©

Hording out for a hero.



ENFORCING CAPITALISM IN THE OUTER WORLDS

PART III

Lifestyles of the rich and fragrant.

By Jeremy Peel

THE RULES

1 Never do your own dirty work.

2 Cut costs and turn a profit for the company.

3 Live by the company's values.

Phineas Welles' last day as a free man began with a handful of caffennoids – all the punch of a morning coffee and none of the warmth. Then breakfast: a crisp tumour from the neck of his only companion, a cystipig named Bubbles. Disgusting, but ethical, and perhaps crucially for a man who's spent 35 years hiding out in an asteroid field, renewable. The fugitive life has a way of stripping away little luxuries.

It's a far cry from life at the Halcyon Holdings Corporation Board, where my stock is rising. Having proven myself in the corporate environment of Spacer's Choice, I've promised information to Chairman Rockwell, which has got me here, to the gates of Byzantium.

The red carpet starts practically at the foot of Adjutant Akande's landing pad, which has been reserved for my arrival, as if I'm showing up to the premiere of the movie of my own life. All this privilege has cost me is an addiction to painkillers and a set of coordinates: the location of Phineas Welles' secret base. Honestly, I'll be doing him a favour – everything's so much shinier here.

I ask ADA, the ship's computer, to play a blast of my favourite song – a sprightly Spacer's Choice advertising jingle, basically the Pina Colada song of 2355 – and step out into the capital. The window of the landing pad offers a glimpse of Byzantium's skyline. It's a tall, but essentially flat city: prefab roofs all reaching to roughly the same height, giving the sense of an upper floor, a higher level of hierarchy. Only transport vessels disturb the smog above.

The guards wave me through a series of automatic doors – they each have a daily conversation quota and dare not exceed it with needless questions. I follow the carpet all the way to the desk of the Adjutant, or rather her personal assistant, Percival Platt.

"I see you haven't been shot to pieces," Platt observes through the spectacles on the very edge of his nose. In fact, the guards in Board HQ don't wield guns but glowing scythes which hover like vultures over the proceedings, waiting to see whether I'll be corporate predator or prey.

The face of the Adjutant appears on a nearby screen. Ten corps banded together to buy the rights to this colony, and I'll need to navigate all their whims, as embodied by this single administrative figure.

"Anyone with eyes can see that you're talented," she says. "But you're also unpredictable. I don't like unpredictable." I ask if she's threatened by my meteoric rise. I've made Emerald Vale's cannery business profitable again. Turned a vicar and a mechanic into unquestioning killing machines. Streamlined HR by terminating ineffective employees with Parvati's big hammer.

"The difference between you and me is a lifetime of service and dedication," the Adjutant intones. That's not strictly true: I've dedicated my life to the Board too. It's just that, having been cryogenically frozen for the better part of a century, my life kinda started about a week ago.

NOW A COUPLE OF HOURS WITHOUT PAINKILLERS LEAVES ME FOGGY

PHARAOH ENOUGH

To prove myself reliable, I'll be retiring a cartographer without pension, if you catch my meaning. It was long believed that in the days of Ancient Egypt, pharaohs would kill their builders so that their tombs could go unplundered.

Well, it turns out CEOs are the new pharaohs: Rachel Lockwood of the Bureau of Exploration has carried out sensitive work for the Board, and is now considered a loose end.

What kind of maps did she draw? Knowing that would only make you a loose end too. I'll bring Lockwood's notes to the Adjutant, and then we'll talk about Welles.

I take the lift down to a rather grander lobby than the one I first entered. The employees at Halcyon Holdings HQ dress in finely cut trousers and brightly coloured blazers, making the Spacer's Choice gear I was once proud to wear look off-world and parochial. I switch to a high boot and mono-lens which I dare say make me look more sophisticated. Out on the immaculately paved street, looming offices and heavy clouds make it difficult to determine the time of day.

I haven't seen anything this overcast since Judi Dench starred in *Cats* 336 years ago. A maintenance bot stomps about, its wrist blades either for topiary or security.

I pull a syringe from a nearby bin. It's an unfortunate habit, but a necessary burden of management; huffing drugs has been the only way to vicariously top up the health of my henchmen while I stand at the back, providing constructive feedback on their combat performance. Now a couple of hours without painkillers leaves me foggy and unproductive.

As I rummage through the waste, an office clerk standing outside the Ministry of Accuracy and Morale demands to know what I'm doing. "Nothing," I reply, looking him in the eye. "Nothing at all." He apologises immediately for speaking without signing a waiver. This is the way of the executive: power trumps truth.

Lockwood's office is staffed primarily by assassins waiting to kill her. A beefy killer named Bradshaw mans reception, and tells me his





» target hasn't shown up for days. He's at the end of his tether, in fact, and gives me the key to Lockwood's room without protest – just as well, since I wasn't prepared to spend money on lockpicks. "Looked like an easy job," he despairs. "She's a map-maker, right? What's she gonna do – consult her maps and find a good place to hide?"

As it happens, Lockwood's room is covered in maps, and it's hard to know which ones might help. But emails on her computer suggest she's gone underground – literally, into the maintenance tunnels beneath Byzantium. She hasn't got far, though. I practically stumble over the errant cartographer at the bottom of a ladder.

"Get away from me," she hisses. "I've got a slide-rule and I'm not afraid to use it." Vicar Max has a shotgun, though, which I order him to make use of. Asking more questions would simply mean spending more time in the sewers, and I'm about ascending the ranks, not exploring the depths. "This is the simple truth," muses Max as we wander back to Akande's office. "We are all molecular machines. The body is a collection of atoms. The mind is a consequence of chemical reaction. Therefore, our lives are predestined along a path that is only visible in retrospect. Life is fated. And unstoppable."

I like this philosophy, since it rids me of any guilt for my actions. This bloody climb to the top of Halcyon corporate culture is a kind of manifest destiny. If you've got an issue, you're free to take it up with my molecules.

The monitor awakens and an image of the Adjutant fills its screen. "You've demonstrated your talents," she says. "If you're ready to talk about Phineas Welles, I'm prepared to listen."

The moment I land on the abandoned asteroid facility Welles has repurposed among the rings of Terra 2, his familiar warble comes in over tannoy.

I'm suddenly nervous: amiable though his manner may be, I'm in the lair of a known terrorist and experimental weapons developer. What kind of defences might he turn on me once my aim becomes clear?

There he is, behind glass – out of physical reach, but nonetheless vulnerable. Welles has been sending me

MARKET FLUCTUATION

PC gaming's most volatile currencies



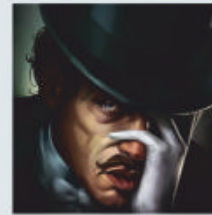
SONIC RINGS

In theory, a ring should be easy to hold onto – you could cover all your fingers and toes before you lose any. Not for Sonic, who hits his overdraft the moment he hits a spike.



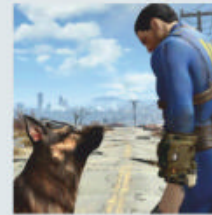
DARK SOULS SOULS

The human instinct to hoard is the wrong one in this case – the more Souls you carry, the more you're risking. At least circulation is limited by the number of enemies in the world.



FALLEN LONDON RUMOURS

Almost anything can be money down here, from Glim to Scraps of Incendiary Gossip. The official coin of the realm is the Echo, but a rumour can put a roof over your head.



FALLOUT BOTTLE CAPS

Twist the top off a fresh Nuka Cola and you've made your first dollar, my friend. Keep it on a bottle of Nuka Cola Quantum since that'll fetch you 50 caps unopened. Now that's pop economics.

messages ever since he shook me out of cryo-sleep, so it stands to reason his base is transmitting a signal. It's just a matter of making it public.

ALL'S WELLES THAT ENDS WELLES

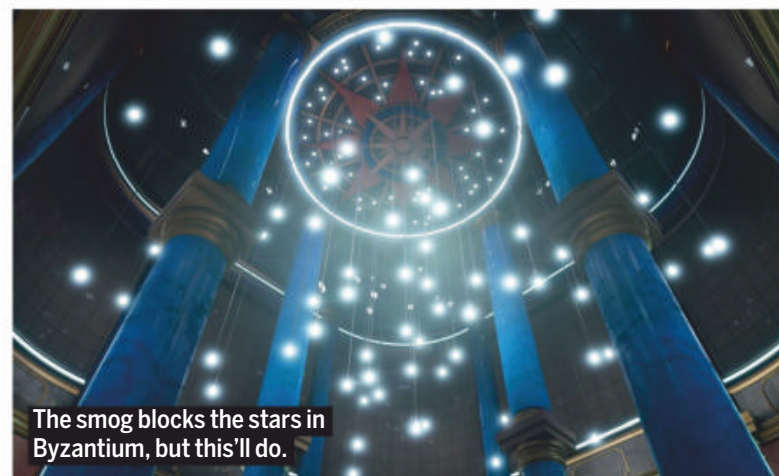
First, though, Welles plays host. "My secret hideout is your secret hideout," he says, and offers me caffennoids. I call him out for waking me from a perfectly good corporate-funded slumber; for loading me into an escape pod and shooting me out into space. He apologises, and suddenly the moment is upon us. The moment in the conversation where, if I'm to warn Welles about the Board's plot against his life, to change the course of the colony forever and work against the system rather than join it, I should say something. But I let it pass.

Research notes hang from string like drying underwear, detailing Welles' experiments in avoiding explosive cell death when defrosting organic material. The experiments that led to me standing here. Welles gave me life, and I'm here to kill god.

"Careful," he yells from across the room as I approach a computer. "That's my communications terminal." I send a tracking signal, establishing a connection with the Board and disabling the lab's orbital defences. Welles is none the wiser, burbling about his latest shrink ray improvements as I head back to the ship and contact the Adjutant.

"Transmissions are so impersonal," she says. "I'd like to meet you face to face. We need to have a talk about the future of this colony." Am I due promotion, or cremation?

You know you're important if you're dressed like a curtain.



The smog blocks the stars in Byzantium, but this'll do.



I've never seen the chairman enter or leave his office.

Welles' lab looks peaceful through the window, encased in rock, its rotation undisturbed by all this political thrust.

Walking into the Adjutant's office back in Byzantium is surreal, like seeing a TV actor in real-life. "I'm curious," she asks. "Welles may have been a delusional madman, but he risked his life to save yours. So why turn him in?"

"Welles is a criminal," I

reply. "I had to." It's an answer written for me by Obsidian, but it's also the truest one I could give.

Throughout this journey I've been beholden to company policy, only bending the rules as far as they could be reasonably interpreted. With

handbook in hand, I've ordered killings and betrayed allies, free merely to follow the path predetermined for me by my molecules.

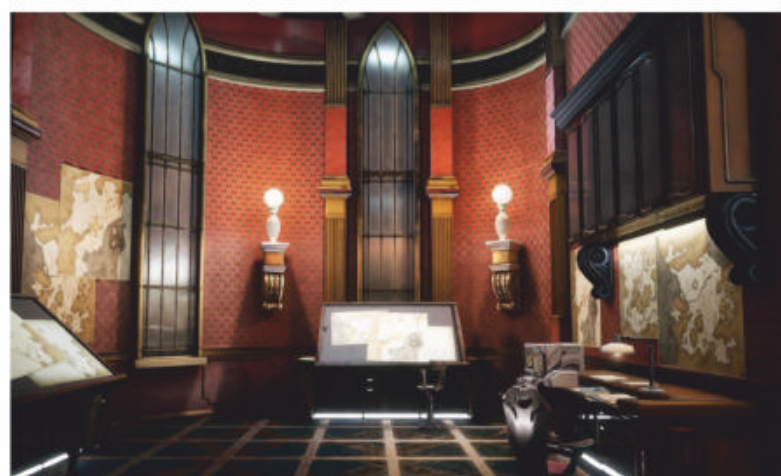
That's certainly what I'll tell myself while drinking Purpleberry Liqueur on the terrace that overlooks Byzantium's central square, anyway.

It's a drabber city than the one I imagined, perpetually smothered by smog. I couldn't tell you the direction of the nearest sun. Out in the street, I pass a woman who complains about the smell – my out-of-town smell. She turns out to be Hortense Ingalsbee, a third-generation Byzantium resident whose grandfather was chief idea

officer at Tile, the tobacco corporation. Grandpop Ingalsbee picked the font used to sell Stogie Slims, and the colours in Rainbow Chips. Apparently purple was controversial. "My grandfather made millions of bits as CIO," Hortense explains, "and I earned them from him."

It's clear that while I'm here, I'll never be of here. The Halcyon colony was sold as a place where I could make something of myself, but that turns out to be a multi-generational project. Ambition can leave you rich and powerful – but it's legacy that gets you respected. Bollocks. Is it too late to re-roll as a dad? ■

I PASS A WOMAN WHO COMPLAINS ABOUT THE SMELL – MY OUT-OF-TOWN SMELL



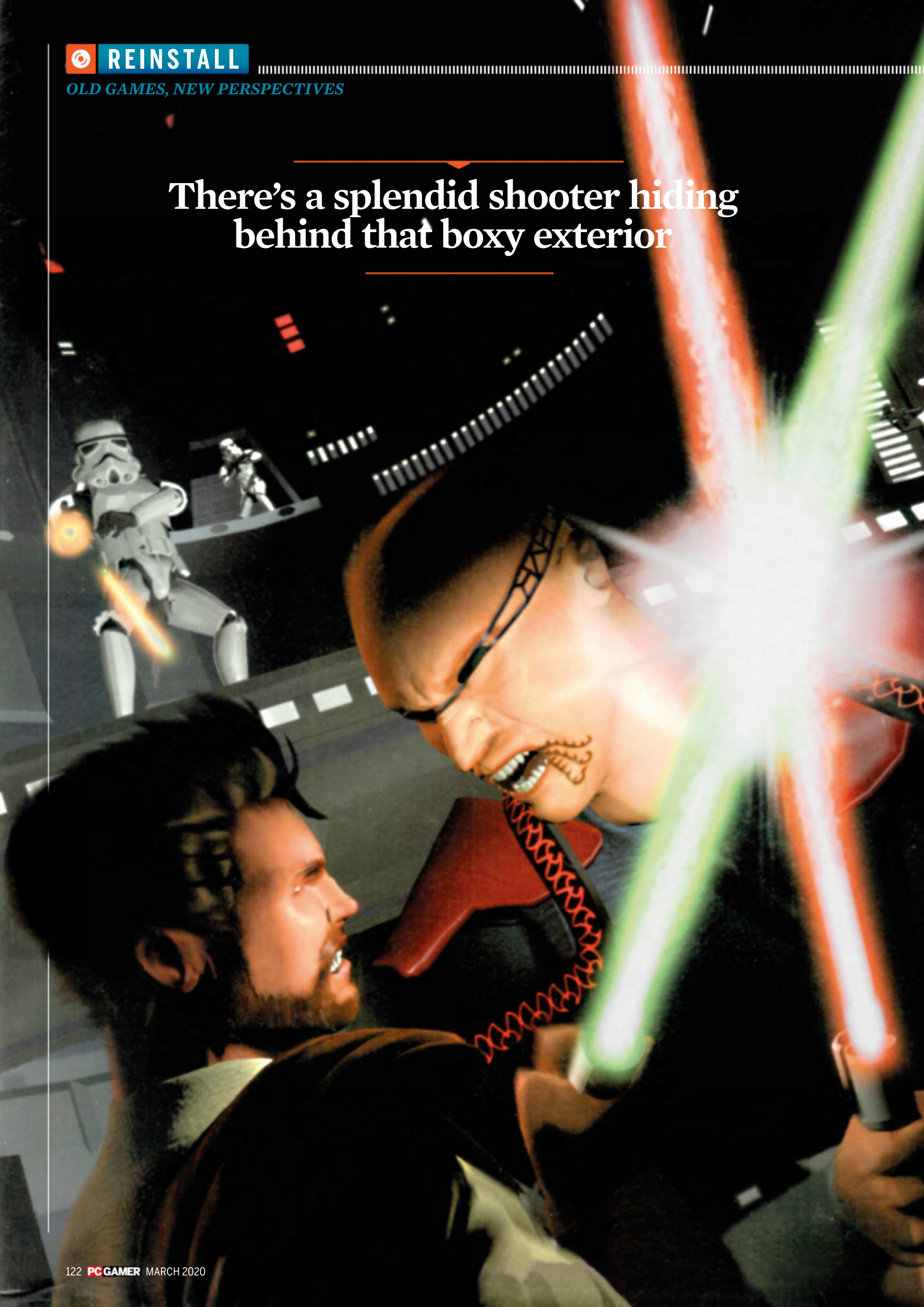
Photographers love the diffuse lighting, but the air quality? Not so much.



REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES

There's a splendid shooter hiding
behind that boxy exterior



Jedi Knight's Stormtroopers wail like a baby when they die.



JEDI KNIGHT: DARK FORCES II

It's tricky to get running, but LucasArts' blaster can still swing it with the best of them. *By Rick Lane*

The best way to judge the quality of any Star Wars fiction is to ask, "What's left if you take out the lightsabers?". Remove those iconic laser swords from the original Star Wars and you're left with basically the same propulsive adventure, only Darth Vader and Obi Wan settle their score with a fistfight instead. Take them out of the Phantom Menace and you're left with two hours of dead-eyed chat about trade negotiations while Jar-Jar pricks about in the background like a nerf herder.

The same notion applies to Star Wars games. Take the lightsaber out of *Jedi: Fallen Order* and you're left with a mediocre *Uncharted* clone. Take it out of *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II*,

however, and you're still left with a fantastic first-person shooter.

Admittedly, it's an FPS which requires some adjustment played today, both in perception and getting the bloody thing running. More on that second point later, but for now let's say that *Dark Forces II* does not like modern PCs at all.

On that first point, there's no escaping it, today *Dark Forces II* has all the visual appeal of Jabba's fat-rolls. Being an early true-3D shooter, all that extra power required to render proper polygons mean massively scaling down the level-of-detail on models and environments. Unlike *Quake*, which could tailor its art to suit its visual limitations, *Jedi Knight* is a Star Wars game, and therefore needs to mimic the Star Wars aesthetic. Hence you end up with angular stormtroopers,

lightsabers you can sometimes see through, and a Kyle Katarn who looks like he's cameoing in *Minecraft*.

Still, there's a splendid shooter hiding behind that boxy exterior, one that reveals itself the moment you blast your first Gran (alien, not octogenarian) in a Nar Shaddaa dive, and he topples to the ground with bone-cracking force.

HIT REACTIONS

Jedi Knight may look terrible, but it still feels amazing. And the way enemies react to being hit is just a part of it. Movement has a wonderful



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
October 10, 1997

DEVELOPER
LucasArts

PUBLISHER
In-house

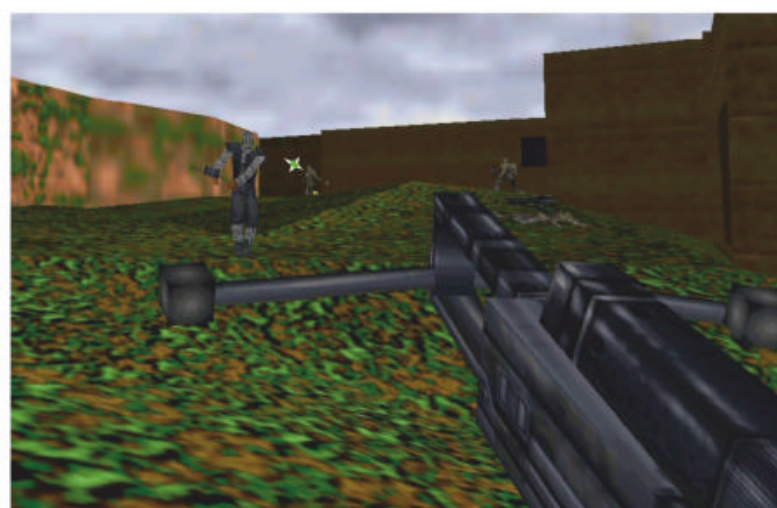
LINK
bit.ly/36Rnxt0



Your lightsaber can chop-off arms, although it's a rare occurrence.



The rail detonator is one of the more obscure weapons in Star Wars games.



» inertial quality. You start moving forward slowly and gradually accelerate. When you stop, you glide slightly before coming to a halt. Normal movement is relatively slow, but if you sprint *Jedi Knight* suddenly turns into *Quake*, with you able to zip around maps at blistering speed, and that's without the Force Speed upgrade you get later in the game.

Weapons are equally satisfying to wield. My favourite is probably the Stormtrooper blaster, which has a satisfying recoil and perfect pew-pew laser sound. But all the weapons have their merits. The Imperial Repeater is a ferocious rapid-fire weapon, useful for clearing crowds of enemies. The Rail Detonator is your equivalent of a rocket launcher, complete with a devious alt fire where its rockets stick into surfaces and enemies for several seconds before exploding. The Concussion Rifle is so ludicrously powerful that it's positively suicidal, wiping out everything when fired in a confined space, including yourself.

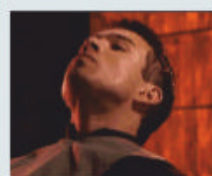
Jedi Knight also spins an entertaining Star Wars yarn, commencing as a chase for a nefarious droid known as 8t88, who has information on the death of

Kyle's father, before slowly evolving into a race to the Valley of the Jedi, where Kyle must confront a group of Dark Jedi (as they are known-in game) led by a powerful Sith named Jerec. Most of the story is told through FMV cut-scenes, which are surprisingly enjoyable despite the bad CG and looking terribly grainy on a modern screen. They're on the campy side, but I'd argue they feel more Star Wars in tone than any of the prequels, with a strong forward momentum and no tedious politics.

STORY TIME

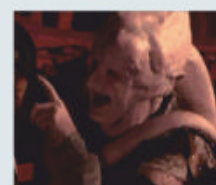
As with all good shooters, however, *Jedi Knight* does its best storytelling through its level design, which provides a huge variety in environments and ideas. In Nar Shaddaa, you battle with Gamorrean Guards and Rodian gangsters along perilously high gangways and across cargo-bay conveyor belts, using the crate lifts to ascend higher and higher into the city-moon's endless skyline. Then you travel to Katarn's home planet, searching his father's dilapidated house while Tuskan Raiders ambush you in the darkness.

DUEL OF THE FATES *The Dark Jedi standing in Kyle Katarn's way*



YUN
The youngest and least experienced of Jerec's crew, Katarn cuts his teeth against Yun in one of the Dark Palace's antechambers.

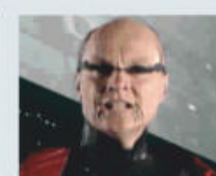
GORC & PIC
Ensuring *Jedi Knight* reaches its muppet quota, the giant Gorc and diminutive Pic make for an intriguing battle.



BOC
The mad Twi'lek Boc battles with two lightsabers and leaps about like an angry frog, resulting in the most unique of *Jedi Knight's* battles.

MAW

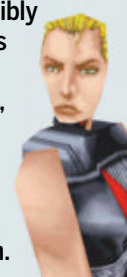
Half-man, all evil, the legless Maw uses a repulsorlift carriage to float around environments, battling Katarn on a spaceship landing platform in one of the game's most dramatic duels.



JEREC
Katarn's final Jedi confrontation with the eyeless Inquisitor Jerec is a straightforward Sith v Jedi showdown. It's truly epic stuff.

SARISS

The only female Sith in Jerec's coterie, Sariss battles Katarn after he confronts (and possibly succumbs to) the Dark Side, resulting in a very different outcome for Katarn.



This is about as detailed as the game's environments get.



JEDI KNIGHT DOES ITS BEST STORYTELLING THROUGH ITS LEVEL DESIGN

And those are just the starting levels. The real highlights of *Jedi Knight* come later. At Baron's Hed, you navigate through the city's sand-blasted streets, rescuing the civilians from 8t88's thugs, before crawling through a ruined district to reveal the vast Imperial Tower of Into the Dark Palace. Here, a literal army of Stormtroopers supported by AT-STs stand between you and access to the palace. In the game's second half, you'll navigate the subterranean pipelines of an interstellar fuel station, fight across the surface of a spaceship as it flies in-atmosphere, and in one of the game's most unique missions, try to escape another spaceship as it plummets to the ground.

What's most striking about *Jedi Knight*'s level design is how Star Wars-y it is, far more so than *Fallen Order*'s generic range of planets. *Jedi Knight* communicates the weird

sense of scale many Star Wars locations have – the lofty hangar bays, the ridiculously oversized ventilation shafts, the many perilous drops that reflect the film's locations such as Bespin and the Death Star. *Jedi Knight*'s ledges and walkways are still capable of putting your heart in your mouth, as you need to leap across a chasm that seems to vanish into shadowy infinity below you.

All of this is great regardless of whether or not you're wielding a lightsaber. In that regard, *Jedi Knight* doesn't have the same level of nuance as its sequel. But *Jedi Knight*'s ethos toward lightsabers and force powers is much more in the spirit of the original films. Jedi are rare and powerful, but not invincible. You can try to play the game exclusively with the saber if you want. But until you've really mastered your force powers, a blaster is a much more efficient way of taking out a large group.

MOD FIXES

Unfortunately *Jedi Knight* has a highly unstable relationship with Windows 10, and in its default state will respond to switching on 3D acceleration by providing a black

screen. Music and cutscenes also won't play in the vanilla version.

There are several ways to fix this, tutorials for which can be easily found online. There are also several different mods for improving the game's visuals, such as DarthTrank's 2009 FOV and Mipmap patches, which sharpen up distant textures and better adjust the game for 16:9 screen. There's also the *Jedi Knight Enhanced* mod, which replaces a lot of the character and weapon models with those from *Jedi Knight II*. Be warned though, some mods are incompatible with certain game fixes and vice-versa.

Even once you've got it running, you'll need to accept the risk of the game crashing whenever you open the options menu, alongside a slightly scratchy element to the sound that I found strangely enjoyable, like playing an old vinyl record on a gramophone. That is, ultimately, what returning to *Jedi Knight* is like.

LucasArts' most ambitious shooter is undeniably dated and is a bit of a faff to set-up. Once the record's spinning, however, its experience has a texture that's more than a match for modern tunes. ■



WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

BEING A HEALER IN FINAL FANTASY XIV

Fighting is all well and good, but someone has to don the white robes.

By Steven Messner



RIGHT: Enormous explosion? Definitely wasn't me.



From the outside, being a healer in *Final Fantasy XIV* – or any MMO – might seem like a boring, thankless job. After all, your mission is to keep your party alive while they get to look all sexy and cool caving a monster's head in with an axe – and if the party dies, you're usually the one to blame. But appearances are deceiving. Any player worth their salt knows how integral a good healer can be to any successful party, and more than anything, I love being that healer.

If you've never played, the concept might seem a bit foreign. But *Final Fantasy XIV*, like practically every MMO, follows a very simple template for the composition of adventure groups. One player plays the tank, whose sole purpose is to be a human shield for their weaker party members and keep monsters' attention focused on them. A few other players are the 'DPS' or damage-dealers and their job is to beat the living tar out of those monsters. And, finally, there's the healer, who keeps everyone alive.

Compared to those other roles, it's no wonder most players prefer to play DPS. In *Final Fantasy XIV* that means being one of a dozen badass classes like a meteor-dropping Black Mage or a spear-wielding Dragoon that leaps around the battlefield impaling baddies. Your entire mission is to spam carefully thought out button combos and melt health bars. Comparatively, healers spend most of their time running around topping off other players' health bars or removing nasty debuffs so they can perform more optimally.

But being the healer is so much fun because it's not a role that demands the spotlight. My job is to

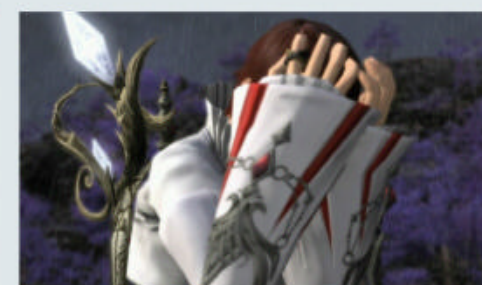
HEALTH BENEFITS

The pros and cons of playing a healer in FFXIV



PROS

- Healers are always in high demand.
- You get a special unicorn to ride around on.
- Everyone likes you when you do well.



CONS

- You have to wear the dumbest costumes.
- Few attack spells, fighting alone is difficult.
- Everyone hates you when you don't do well.

help other players do their job. It's emotionally fulfilling in an unexpected way, and I'm completely hooked on it.

BRINGING THE FUN

Back when MMOs first became a pop culture phenomenon with *World of Warcraft*, the simple fact that I was adventuring with strangers was novel and exciting. Whether I was running a dungeon with other players or just

Being the healer, though, makes me keenly aware that I'm playing with other people, because most of the time I'm having to fix their mistakes. If a DPS messes up, there's little the tank can do to rectify it. I think that's why so many players get mad at each other in MMOs. They lash out not only in frustration but also in helplessness.

As a healer, I have the power to fix all of that and ensure everyone has a positive experience. I am the king of fixing mistakes. If the DPS takes a hit they should have avoided, I can heal that. If the tank screws up a complex manoeuvre that results in the party taking heavy damage, I can heal that too. More than any other class, I have the power to turn what could be a negative experience into a positive one. It just depends on whether I can do my job well.

This might sound like an oxymoron, but I feel a weirdly humble sense of pride in being a good healer. If I can manage my mana and spell cooldowns properly, I'm doing more than merely keeping my team alive. I'm helping them have fun. In a way, I'm given the heavy responsibility of setting the tone for a group of strangers taking on enormous challenges together. There's already so much toxicity online, and it's nice to know a Cure spell can be the difference between a good party or a bad one. ■

I FEEL A WEIRDLY HUMBLE SENSE OF PRIDE IN BEING A GOOD HEALER

exploring the world, I was always painfully aware that everyone around me were other humans. Over the past few decades, though, that feeling has faded considerably – largely because MMOs began to cater to convenience with features like automatic matchmaking that slowly squeezed the social aspects out of playing. Now when I run a dungeon, I don't really need to talk to my team because they're all strangers from other servers and once we defeat the boss I'll never see them again. Because of that, many players objectify their teammates, seeing them only as a means to an end. They might as well not be real players at all.

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finalfantasyxiv.com

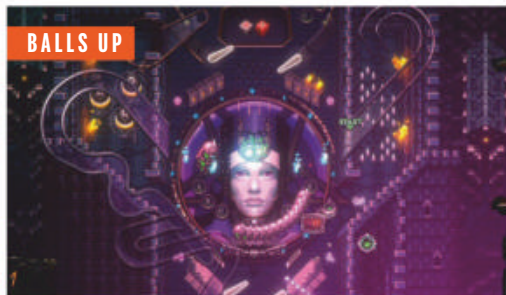


LEFT: White Mages get an iconic set of robes to wear.



ROBIN
VALENTINE

I'll be honest – the only reason I even play PC games these days is to fill out pages like this one.



DEMON'S TILT

www.demonstilt.com

→ I'm pretty clueless when it comes to pinball – any strategy beyond just 'hit the ball whenever it comes near a flipper' is entirely beyond me. But there's something wonderfully hypnotising about this surreal, demon-infested table. It's at once deeply nostalgic and quite unlike anything I've ever played.



ALAN WAKE

www.remedygames.com/games/alan-wake

→ If you loved *Control* last year, but you've never played *Alan Wake*, you need to fix that. It's the perfect distillation of what makes Remedy's games so fascinating to me – a team of Europeans reinterpreting and reflecting the American fiction and culture they've been bombarded with. Hammy, yet utterly enthralling.



DARKSIDERS GENESIS

darksiders.com

→ I'm admittedly a devoted fan of the series, but I do think this action-RPG spin-off stands on its own two feet. Brilliantly clever level design makes seeking out every last secret and collectible a treat, and being able to switch between two protagonists keeps the satisfying combat fresh from start to finish.



FAR: LONE SAILS

www.far-game.com

→ Over the last few years I've realised that one of my favourite things to do in games is simply travel. Over just an hour or two, this minimalist indie nails that feeling of a long, difficult, but ultimately satisfying journey, as you struggle to drive a strange, erratic vehicle across a post-apocalyptic wasteland.

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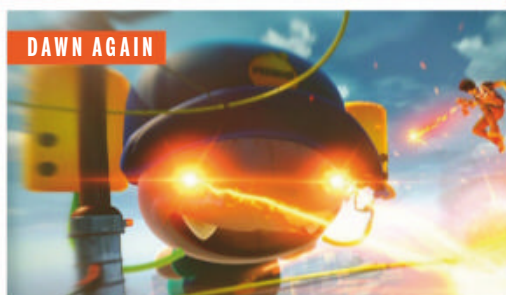
by Robin Valentine



BATMAN: THE ENEMY WITHIN

www.telltale.com/batman-the-enemy-within

→ This latter-day Telltale sequel was largely ignored on release, but honestly I think it tells the freshest Batman story in years. Its take on the relationship between Bruce and the Joker brilliantly subverts the series' well-worn canon, but without ever betraying the core ideas that make the two characters work.



SUNSET OVERDRIVE

insomniac.games/game/sunset-overdrive

→ For how huge today's open worlds have become, it's odd to me that so little thought seems to go into how you actually get around them. This former console exclusive is a little half-baked, but it's worth checking out just for how deliriously fun its bouncy parkour makes the simple act of moving from point A to point B.



ARMELLO

armello.com

→ This digital board game shines when you can get a group of like-minded friends together for some multiplayer. Strategic and tactile, it brings the best of tabletop to your PC, and a rich, detailed art style breathes extraordinary life into its world of medieval anthropomorphic animals.



STEAMWORLD HEIST

imageform.se/game/steamworld-heist

→ All of the *SteamWorld* games are fantastic, but to my mind this is the crown jewel. Its slick, streamlined turn-based strategy is hugely elevated by cleverly implemented manual aiming. Pulling off a ricocheting trickshot that bounces into an enemy's head from behind is wonderfully satisfying.



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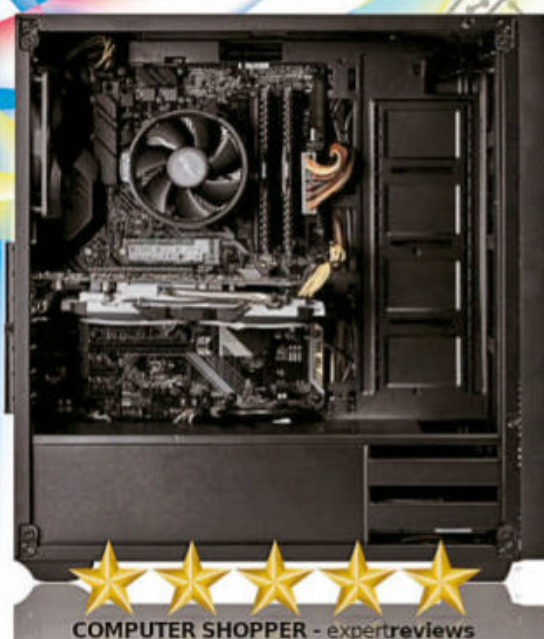
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